

When In Hawkins by Hannah Joy

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Summary: Meg Robbins: aspiring director, mouthy teenager, expert driver. She's just moved to Hawkins, Indiana; a move of cruel and undeserved punishment. She's got five months til graduation and she's planning to keep her head down and get it done. Unfortunately, she's never been very good at that. And when the strangest things begin happening, keeping her head down is no longer an option.

1. Chapter 1

Welcome to my story!

This is set after Season 1 & 2. I will try as much as possible to only use information regarding characters that we're given within the show so as to stay within canon. However, a few liberties have been taken later in the story for the sake of plot. Nothing major, though.

I hope you enjoy this little project of mine!

Disclaimer: I own nothing except for Meg and her mom.

In early January, a red Ford Escort passed a roadside sign bearing the phrase,

Welcome to Hawkins, IN.

Within the car was Virginia Henderson, who was humming excitedly in the passenger's seat, and her daughter, Megan, who was driving while glaring at the road. The pair shared the same pale skin and straight nose, but the resemblance stopped there. Virginia had auburn curls and bright blue eyes, and a slightly confused smile which seemed to be her default expression. Her daughter sported shoulder length dark hair and beneath her bangs were eyes that were almost black. She most often wore a calculating frown, and if she was smiling, it was most likely to be mischievous in nature. Virginia was the colour that floated on the autumn air; Megan related more the dirtied snow which lined the road upon which they drove.

"We're here, dear," Virginia announced. She giggled at the rhyme and Megan forced her eyes not to roll up and into her head. "This is so exciting! I spoke to your aunt on the phone this morning-

"I know, I was there."

"And she was *so excited* for us to come in today." Virginia clasped her hands together. "She already has the guest room all made up, and I shouldn't really tell you this – Claudia wanted it to be a surprise – but she's making us a *special* dinner."

"How exciting," Meg deadpanned.

They finally began to drive past things other than trees; a gas station, a diner, what looked like a car wash but boasted a cardboard cut-out of a cartoon dog in the bath. What was that advertising? A pet-wash? These small-town people couldn't be bothered to wash their own pets? Meg's frown deepened as they drove further into this whacked town. Virginia noticed, and turned her own frown on her daughter. "Now don't you start, young lady. And don't even think about giving your aunt attitude. We're here to help her, not weigh her down with your adolescent drama."

Megan didn't look at her mother. "I was under the impression that us moving here was for your benefit as much as hers. It sure isn't benefiting anyone else."

Her mother huffed. "Claudia and I both want to live near each other again. A sisterly bond is important." She crossed her arms, and Meg could sense a lecture coming. "And this attitude of yours is completely unjustified, Megan. Living in Hawkins has the potential to be good, and you aren't even considering it. You may not be benefiting from it right now, but you're certainly not suffering either." At this, Meg turned an incredulous look on her mother. Virginia just put her finger up. "This is not a punishment, and I don't see why you're treating it as such. It is just a change."

Tightening her hands around the steering wheel, Megan felt her jaw began to ache from how tightly she was clenching it. *Not a punishment*. If her mother was going to make her suffer, the least she could do was be outright about it. "Are you telling me this has nothing to do with what happened?"

Virginia made a *tsk*-ing noise. "*What happened* was you misbehaving, dear. And us moving here was not a result of your behaviour. You know that I'd been considering it for a few months."

"But it was the deciding factor," Meg insisted.

At this, her mother let out a sigh and looked out the window. "Not everything is about you, Megan Robbins." Meg bit down so hard she was sure her jaw would break. That particular phrase was one she

had heard much too often, and in much worse circumstances. Virginia turned her head to look at her, and there was a beat of silence before she spoke again. "I did not decide to move just to punish you for what you did. But if leaving Indianapolis and living in Hawkins teaches you a lesson, all the better."

It wasn't an outright confession, but it said enough. Megan glared at the street and the passing buildings. She had been right. Moving to Hawkins, Indiana was a punishment that Meg did not deserve.

The first thing that Meg noticed about her aunt was that she wore the same perfume as her mother. When they pulled their car into the driveway, Claudia Henderson had come whirling out of her house in a rush of greetings and giggles. After the two sisters gushed over one another, Claudia had pulled Meg into a smothering embrace. Meg was ensconced in the scent of old sweaters, cat hair, and the musky perfume that her mother had worn for as long as she could remember.

Claudia's hair was the same reddish hue as her sister, and their plump lips stretched into the same smile. With her aunt's arms wrapped around her, Meg realised that there was perhaps only one thing which differed between the two women. Where Claudia was soft and pliable, Virginia's bones were lined with glass beneath her thin skin. Meg glanced at her mother, and caught the brief weariness lining her face. It was gone in a second.

"You're here! Oh, come inside!" Claudia had grasped both women by the hand and led them into a stiflingly warm house. Before her aunt swung the door closed, Meg cast a last look at her car where it sat unlocked. Surely even towns as small as this still had crime. A frantic thought came suddenly, suggesting that she could insist that she go back out to lock the car, and then climb inside it and drive away before anyone could stop her.

But her mother would be alone with her aunt, and neither of them were prepared to be on their own, not really. Not after all they'd been through. And if Meg left, it would hurt both women. Her mother would probably be frantic with worry, and might even get her father to hunt her down. The image of her father's frown was enough to make Meg turn around and breathe in the musty air of Claudia's

home. She wiped the image from her mind.

It was around five in the evening, and the sun outside was already beginning to set. Claudia had herded Virginia and Meg into the kitchen and sat them at a table laden with food. Meg may not have wanted to be there, but the smells wafting up from the cooking dishes before her had her planted in her seat. It was a pot roast: beef, potatoes, carrots. There were four pieces of corn on the cob and a gravy boat which called Meg's name in a sultry voice. Her mouth began to water and her stomach reminded her that the last she'd eaten was a few chicken nuggets for lunch. Maybe her aunt's food would make this hell-hole bearable.

"Ta-da!" Claudia sang. She beamed at them over the table. "Are you surprised?"

Meg thought back to the last time she'd been with her aunt: Thanksgiving, the year before last. Claudia had been in charge of the turkey, and had produced something that looked like a turkey, but tasted more like cardboard. Meg had attempted to block the memory out entirely, but to no avail. Without thinking, she blurted, "Yes."

Claudia was clearly pleased by her answer, but Virginia knew exactly what her daughter meant, and gave her a warning look.

Meg cleared her throat and gave her aunt a smile. "This looks great, Aunt Claudia. Thanks for having us."

"Of course! I'm just so glad you're here." Her smile looked wide enough to split her plump, rosy cheeks. Meg absently wondered if it hurt at all. Claudia's eyes suddenly widened. "Oh, Dustin isn't even in here yet. He's probably talking to his little friends on the radio again. My, those boys can chat all day and night. I haven't the faintest what they even have to talk about!" Meg didn't think she wanted to know what exactly teenage boys 'chatted' about. "Just wait one moment while I grab him."

Her aunt trotted down the hall, and Meg set her eyes back to the feast laying before her. Muffled voices drifted down the hall. Meg took a deep, lingering breath and basked in the rich scents of each overflowing platter. Her lips quirked as she caught sight of Virginia

eyeing the roast beef with bright eyes. They met each other's gaze, and for the first time in a few days, Megan found herself sharing a genuine smile with her mother.

And then a loud groan met their ears, and the warmth of the moment leached out into the winter air.

"*Fine*," a disgruntled voice agreed. A cheery response rang out – clearly from Claudia – and was followed by the sound of footsteps approaching the kitchen. Meg and Virginia shared a different, wary look.

Claudia entered the room with the same thousand-watt smile as before. It was in stark comparison to the frown on her son's face as he looked at Meg. She met his look with a cool stare.

Suddenly that Thanksgiving came surging forward in Megan's mind. Her cousin's incessant chattering, her parents snapping and growling at each other, her aunt being blissfully unaware of the tension. She remembered whirling around and hissing at the nearest target. '*Do you ever shut up? Just go away, toothless.*'

Looking now at the hostility in Dustin's gaze, she knew he hadn't forgotten her words.

"Dustin!" Virginia cooed. Either not noticing the tension between the two youths or choosing to ignore it, she rose to smother her nephew and leave a smear of *Rich Rosé* lipstick on his cheek. Dustin mustered a smile and a greeting, and when Virginia turned to the table, he wiped his cheek with the sleeve of his sweatshirt.

Meg's eyes followed him as he moved to sit across from her. "Hey."

Dustin just looked at her as he sat. He gave her a slight nod before looking away.

Perhaps she should apologise for what she'd said. But it was two years ago! He should've gotten over it by now. And from what she could see, all of his teeth had grown in. Besides, he wasn't the one who had been watching his parent's marriage fall apart at the dinner table.

Meg shrugged off her thoughts. She couldn't care less what Dustin thought. But she did care about the heavy-laden table in front of her.

Claudia returned from retrieving the water jug from the kitchen, and finally all four relatives were sitting around the table in varying degrees of excitement. The two sisters were chattering away at the speed of lightning and releasing bouts of clucking laughter in between bites of their supper. Megan had managed to get her hands on the holy gravy boat and didn't bother to restrain her gleeful smile as she poured a lavish amount of the coveted sauce over her plate. If she was going to be forced to be here, she was going to take as much gravy as she pleased.

Dustin, on the other hand, was not participating in the conversation and picked at his food more than he actually ate it. He'd flick his eyes up to look at her every once in a while, only to look back at his plate as soon as she met his gaze.

Meg shook her head. Were all boys this mopey? She stifled a snort. Let the kid pout, she didn't care. She stabbed a piece of gravy-slathered roast beef and slid it into her mouth, her tastebuds anticipating the rush of heavenly flavours.

Only to snap her mouth shut so fast she almost bit her tongue clean off. An unholy union of unrecognizable spices hit her tongue seconds before she realised that the beef itself had the texture of leather. The gravy – the blessed, god-sent gravy – was the only thing keeping Meg from spitting out the meat and wiping at her tongue. She carefully schooled her features and sent a furtive glance toward her aunt, hoping she hadn't noticed Meg practically gagging. Thankfully, Claudia was wiping tears of laughter from her eyes and paid her no heed.

Meg turned back to her plate and her eyes caught on the sly gaze of Dustin sitting across from her. The wicked glint in his eyes and toothy grin caused a lightbulb to click on in Meg's head. The way he was picking at his food, the furtive glances he snuck at her. The brat had known exactly what Meg was about to bite into, and had planned on enjoying her torture.

Frowning at him, Meg stabbed her fork into a chunk of potato

without breaking eye contact. She held it up for him to see and raised a single eyebrow. *Is this safe for humans to consume?*

Dustin made a poor attempt at hiding a grin and gave her a shrug. *Maybe.*

Her brows furrowed. *That's not an answer.*

She watched him for a few seconds, her lips pursed. She eyed the potato. It seemed innocent enough. With a bracing breath, Meg shoved the potato into her mouth. Maybe if she just ate really fast, her tastebuds wouldn't suffer and she could get out of this torture-dinner mess-free.

But as the warm, soft potato and gravy melted in her mouth, Meg realised with a start that it was actually quite good. She slowed the desperate pace of her chewing, and swallowed easily. Her eyes flew up to her cousin, whose smile was wide and unabashed. He was laughing at her! Meg looked at his plate and noticed for the first time that he had eaten more than she'd thought. All of his potatoes were gone and only a few bites of carrots and corn were left. The only untouched food was the roast beef from hell.

Dustin's green eyes were full of mirth and he smiled at her through a mouthful of carrots. Megan wrinkled her nose at the mushy sight. *Disgusting.*

Suddenly, her mother turned to her as she spoke. "Meg and I didn't dare blink when we came into town. We just wanted to see everything!" Meg stifled a scoff. She'd kept her eyes on the road and critiqued whatever she did see. There was an outrageous amount of potholes in the streets for a town this size. "But Hawkins hasn't changed," Virginia mused. "It's still the quaint little town I remember from our childhood, Dia."

At this, Dustin perked up. "Actually, Hawkins has changed a lot, even in the last couple years." He paused, glancing at his mother. Was he seeking her approval? For talking? Or maybe for correcting an adult. Meg frowned at the idea. He was allowed to correct someone, especially if he really did know more about the subject than they did. Her mother hadn't been to Hawkins in at least ten years. Megan had

never stepped foot in the place.

"We've gotten a lot of new stuff," Dustin continued, seeming to have shrugged off whatever had given him pause. "The arcade was put in last year and the bowling alley got refurbished the year before that. And the old library got replaced by a big movie theatre, which was a while ago but it's still kinda new. I mean, the seats don't smell like-"

"Dustin," Claudia chided.

The boy just grinned, but held his hands up in surrender. "Some stuff is gone, too. That gross diner got demolished. Me and my friends went and watched. It was crazy."

At this, Virginia let out a slight gasp and turned to her sister. "He doesn't mean Benny's diner, does he?"

"He does," Dustin answered with a slight frown. Meg hid a grin behind a sip of her drink. No kid liked being spoken around instead of to. Virginia just pursed her lips and stabbed a carrot. "And that creepy, whack lab got shut down last year. Finally." Dustin's gaze darkened for a brief moment before looking away.

Virginia and Claudia went back to their discussion, but Meg looked at Dustin. Hawkins used to have a mysterious lab? She wondered what went on in there, and why it had gotten shut down. Watching her cousin look darkly at his plate, she also wondered what he knew about it.

Before she could ask him about it, Claudia turned to her with a sunny smile. "Are you excited to start at Hawkins High, Meggie?"

Meg forced herself not to wince at the nickname from her childhood. "I don't know if I'm necessarily *excited* to start my second half of senior year at a new school, Aunt C. But I do think I'm prepared."

Her mother took this opportunity to gloat about Megan's achievements. "Her high school back in Indianapolis was very sad to see her go, of course. She was on the honour roll, you know." Claudia's smile tightened. Of course she knew. Virginia had to have told her at least fifty times. "But the school here was more than

happy to have her enrol. The principal sounded very eager on the phone. He said that 'Hawkins High would be honoured to welcome such a bright student'. He really said that." Virginia looked proudly at Megan. She summoned a half-hearted smile. Her mother could brag all she wanted. Meg knew that she'd never really be able to please her.

Claudia straightened in her chair. "Well, Dustin's been doing very well in school. Straight A's and glowing reports."

"Except for Art," Dustin remarked. "That was a C."

"Sure," Claudia said with a clenched jaw. "But that can easily be pulled up. I'm sure that you'll just flourish in high school. You'll sweep up all of the science awards, just like you have in middle school." She turned to her sister. "Did I ever tell you that they were talking about moving him up a grade? I said no at the time because I wanted him to be around children his own age."

"That was in first grade, Mom," Dustin groaned.

Meg looked at her cousin and gave him a subtle eye-roll, nodding towards their mothers. He looked at her blankly before shaking his head.

Before long, the dishes had been cleared away and Claudia gave her sister and niece a tour of her small, stiflingly warm house. Dustin claimed to have homework waiting for him in his room, but Meg was pretty sure that he just didn't want to be around them. She couldn't really blame him.

After the tour, the three women had sat in the living room as they caught up on all the living they had done while apart. Meg had stayed purely out of wanting to be polite to her host on the first night of being her guest. After a few hours, Meg looked at the clock wearily. She hoped these chats wouldn't become a regular thing.

With a yawn, Meg had excused herself, bidding her mother and aunt goodnight. As she padded down the hallway, she approached Dustin's room. His door was cracked, and she could hear him talking. Her footsteps halted. She leaned closer to the door. A brief thought

flashed through her mind that eavesdropping might not be the best way to make the kid like her, but she dismissed it. She didn't care what he thought.

"She's worse than Erica, I'm telling you," Dustin said. His voice was full of attitude, clearly trying to prove a point. He must have been using his walkie talkie. There was a muffled noise; she couldn't make out whatever the other person was saying. "Shut up, Lucas. Erica still likes you. Meg just yells and calls me names."

Meg's breath caught. The little twerp was talking about her to his lame friends. And being rude about it, too! She hadn't yelled at him or called him any names since she'd arrived. He was still holding a grudge from two years ago? Ridiculous.

Another muffled noise. Dustin released a frustrated groan. "It was a couple years ago," he grumbled. Clearly whoever he was talking to had brought up the same point. "And she hasn't said anything yet. But she still glares and rolls her eyes and pretends to be nice around the adults. It's a matter of time before she goes all crazy. She's the worst."

Anger coursed through Meg's veins. Without thinking, she shoved the door open. Dustin had been sprawled across his bed, but shot up when Meg stepped through the doorway, dropping his walkie talkie. "Hey, kid," Meg spat. "Tell your little friend I said hi, since you're telling them everything else about me."

Dustin frowned and pushed himself off the bed. "You were eavesdropping on me? You *are* the worst."

Meg scoffed. "*I'm* the worst? You're mad at me for something I said years ago. Talk about petty." She crossed her arms. "I was trying to be nice to you tonight. Clearly I shouldn't have bothered."

"It's not like you ever apologised."

"Oh, please," Megan said. "You want me to apologise? Fine. I'm sorry for hurting your feelings two years ago when my parents were on their way to divorce. I'm also sorry that you're still pouting about it." Dustin's glare darkened. Meg just pointed a finger at him. "And don't think I forgot about how you enjoyed watching me eat that god-awful

beef. Nice way to start us off, loser."

Dustin rolled his eyes. "You're mad at me for holding something against you, but you're offended that I didn't warn you about my mom's cooking? Who's petty now? And stop calling me names!"

Meg heard their mothers' voices start to quiet in the living room. She glared at her cousin. Her voice was low as she spoke. "Whatever, dweeb. Just leave me alone, and I'll leave you alone. Maybe we'll survive living together."

Dustin went to respond, but she just stepped back and pulled his door shut. She heard him release an angry sound.

Glowering, she retreated to the room she would be sharing with her mother while they looked for a place to live. The thought left a bitter taste in Meg's mouth as she changed clothes and crawled into bed.

This town was her home now. She'd be driving down streets without lines and going to little Ma n' Pa shops to get her groceries. She'd have to make new friends and work hard to catch up in class. And apparently she'd have to put up with a whiny baby all the time. *It's temporary*, she told herself. *I just have to last six months*. She'd return to Indianapolis for college and leave this tiny, awful town for good. *Just six torturous months*.

2. Chapter 2

Hello, again!

Thank-you so much for the kind reviews, follows, and favorites you all bestowed upon me! I'm so excited to be posting chapter two of When In Hawkins.

I've got a decent portion of this story written, so I'll attempt to keep to a regular updating schedule. I should be posting on Fridays, so keep an eye out.

I hope you begin to like Meg more as I begin to flesh her out in the next couple of chapters. If you have any thoughts, suggestions, or theories, feel free to drop them in a review or a message! I love to hear from you; any feedback is greatly appreciated!

Warnings: There are some insults and slurs in this chapter. None of them are any worse than what is shown in the TV show, but I thought I'd let you know ahead of time. Just to be clear, I do not agree with the racial and sexual insults/views stated by the characters in this. I've used them here as an attempt to convey the nature of these characters.

Disclaimer: I own nothing, save for Meg, Claudia, and the few minor characters smattered throughout.

Enjoy!

"Mom, I don't need a ride to school."

From her room, Megan could hear Dustin protesting Claudia's suggestion that he let Meg drive him to school. Claudia made it out like Meg would be doing Dustin the favour, but Meg suspected that her aunt didn't want her to get lost on her first day. It was an amusing thought. Megan had lived in a much bigger city than this and had always known exactly where she was. If there was one thing her father had taught her, it was to be aware of her surroundings.

Over the weekend, Megan had taken the time to sit and pour over a map of Hawkins. She traced the street lines with her finger,

committing each marking to memory. Her deft hands rotated the map so that she was familiar with each direction and could find anything in the town from anywhere in the town. Names floated through her mind, each carefully filed away. Hawkins High, Hawkins Middle School, the library, a Radio Shack. Her eyes followed a road which led into the woods. There was a long railroad track snaking through the trees. Several areas within the woods caught her eye. A large lake, a clearing for a junk yard, and a street that led to a large, unmarked area. Someone had used red pen to scrawl the words '*the lab*' over the area. Meg's eyes had narrowed when she'd spotted it. *Must be the place Dustin had mentioned.*

So on her first Monday in Hawkins, Megan was more than prepared to find her way around this tiny town. She definitely didn't need her wastoid cousin to show her around, and she definitely didn't want to spend more time with him than necessary. The two had studiously avoided each other for the past two days. The only interaction they had was to ask the other to pass the salt and occasionally share a glance when their mothers were being particularly embarrassing. Other than that, they barely acknowledged each other's existence.

Megan tuned out the voices of her relatives. Instead, she focused on the mirror in front of her. Her calculating eyes roamed her figure. Her white sneakers, laced with double knots. Her denim, high-waisted jeans. Her white and red striped sweater beneath her prized possession: a large denim jacket with brass buttons. Meg nodded to herself. It was a coordinated, tasteful ensemble. On trend, but not so fashionable as to stand out in the small-town high school. It was exactly what she had been aiming for when she'd pieced the outfit together last night.

She took a moment to run her fingers through her dark hair and adjust her bangs. Her hair laid in thick waves stopping just at her shoulders, despite the fact that large, wild curls were all the rage. Almost all of her friends in Indianapolis sported them, but Meg had never attempted them. Something about the *permanence* of a perm was off-putting to her. Besides, she had watched her friends spend ages pinning their curls into place and dousing them with enough hair spray to choke a man. She much preferred being able to run a brush through her thick hair and move on.

Her reflection frowned at her. Her eyes looked as though each of her thoughts was swirling around in their dark pools. She was starting at a new school half-way through her senior year. She had moved to a new town only to live in it for a few months before she left for college. She was living with two hyper-emotional women and one smart-aleck kid. This whole thing was ridiculous and counter-productive. On top of that, she was nervous. It was stupid to worry about what these people would think of her when she'd only be around them for one semester. And yet, that tight feeling of anxiety was wrapped around her lungs.

Looking into her black eyes, Meg took a deep, calming breath before addressing herself. "You look good. You're prepared. You're smart. Go out there and kill 'em."

With that, she grabbed her bag, her car keys, and her prized possession and strode out of her room.

Dustin had ended up getting his way and was coasting down the driveway on his bicycle when she made it to the door. After reassuring her aunt that she would be just fine, Meg waved goodbye to her mother and left the Henderson's stuffy house.

She did, in fact, know her way around. She had even left early to allow for any potential complications. Meg planned a course through the town before leaving the driveway, and followed it directly to the gas station.

There were two pumps, and one was occupied by a beat-up beige truck with *Hawkins Police Department* spread across its side. There was a man sitting inside, talking on a CV radio. A small, blank face peered at Meg from behind the passenger's window. Brown doe-like eyes watched her as she began to fill her car's tank. Meg raised an eyebrow at her. The kid blinked and turned away.

Inside, Meg tossed a pack of gum onto the counter and paid the cashier. She opened the pack and slid a piece into her mouth as the cashier dug her thick fingers into the register. "Two-seventy change," the woman droned.

Meg reached her hand out, but faltered when the sound of a revving

engine and a blaring horn reached them. In the parking lot, the nose of a blue Camaro was nearly pressed flush to her car's bumper. Its driver gave two more blasts of his horn. Meg's features tightened and settled into a glare. Pocketing her change, she exited the store in long strides. The police truck was gone and the second pump was free. If he was in this much of a hurry, he easily could have drove around and used the other pump. Instead, this jerk was practically running her car over.

As she approached, the young guy rolled his window down and gave her a sleazy look. He probably wore his stringy mullet and unbuttoned shirt to be enticing, but to Meg they only triggered warning bells. "You took your time, princess."

Megan swung her car door open and shot him an icy look. "Any chance to inconvenience a dirt-bag."

His features turned livid and he leaned farther out of his window. "Maybe next time I'll-

She slid into her car and slammed her door shut before he could finish. He laid on his horn again as she began to pull away. In her rear-view mirror, she could see him holding a single finger out to her.

Great start to the day, she thought.

Hawkins High School was much smaller than Megan's previous school, but it wasn't very different. It was made of the same brown brick. It welcomed the same type of hormonal, reluctant teenagers. It encouraged the same awkward, stifling atmosphere. She decided that no matter what city or town it was in, every high school was oppressive.

Megan was early by a few minutes. Enough time to park, talk herself into going through with the school day, and find the counsellor's office. Sitting in her car, she stared at the kids walking into the building. Whether they were walking in groups or as individuals, they all seemed to move at the same sluggish pace. Meg was reminded of ants crawling along, each following the one in front, all giving off the sense of scattered purpose. It was mindless. It was highly likely that none of them wanted to be there – some of them

would probably end up leaving – but they still filed into the school. They lived under an expectation of the mundane.

Heaving a breath, Meg picked her bag up off of the seat next to her. *Enough nihilistic musing*, she told herself. Even if it seemed pointless, she was here for a reason. It was just another step in the plan.

She exited her car, locked it, and started towards the school's entrance. Her pace wasn't relaxed or hurried; her strides were even and purposeful. She was careful to keep her shoulders straight and her face blank. Kids passed her without a second glance. She blended easily into the crowd. Her eyes picked out the people around her which were likely to be in her grade, then noted which of them seemed like people she'd be okay with engaging with, and those which she definitely wanted to avoid. It was a subconscious task, a habit she had developed somewhere along the way. The subtle weighing-up of the people around her, casting swift but fair judgment. Sometimes she didn't even realise she was doing it.

As she reached the middle of the parking lot, a commotion to her left caught her attention.

"What's this, Byers? New porn?" A group of guys were standing near a car, facing a boy with shaggy hair and tired eyes. Meg slowed her pace as she observed them.

The boy seemed to be clutching a stack of photographs, defending them against these obvious bullies. One of the guys managed to snatch one, and Meg frowned. Not only was it mean, but he had clearly just crumpled the picture's edge. "I bet it's all of your slut girlfriend," the bully sneered.

"I bet they're of all sorts of women," another boy jeered. "*Old women. Blacks.* You probably get off looking at them, creep."

The boy made protests, but was roughly shoved back by two much larger guys. Although he looked upset and angry, there was also a tiredness to his movements, a resigned sort of acceptance. Even as his fists were curled, his shoulders were slumped, as though this was nothing new. As though he had come to expect such harassment.

When the boy made to snatch back one of the pictures, a tall jock-looking guy gripped his arm and pulled it backwards. The boy gave a low noise of pain, but ceased to protest.

As she watched, Megan felt a heat curl within her. A strong, harsh memory surfaced. The sounds of a scuffle and disgusting slurs being thrown like stones. The ache in her knuckles from clutching cold steel. The sight of dripping blood.

With her jaw clenched, she stomped up to the group of boys. When she was near enough to smell the odour often associated with teenage boys, the voice of her mother rang in her ears. *Don't start any trouble, young lady.*

Well, Virginia hadn't said anything about finishing it.

"Hey," Meg called. Each of the boys turned to look at her. They wore nearly identical expressions of surprise which morphed into suspicion at her own defiant look. Meg glanced at the guy with the photographs and gave him a slight nod before turning to the rest of them. "You losers want to back off of my friend here?"

The idiots' faces became incredulous. The boy looked confused. Meg just raised her chin.

One guy stepped forward, the one who had initiated the confrontation. His face was covered in freckles and his eyes held a cruel glint. He leaned over Meg and gave her a cruel smile. "Your friend? Are you screwing him too?"

A bout of identical, obnoxious laughter echoed around the group. Meg crossed her arms. "If I was, it's none of your business." When she was met only with mocking grins, she leaned forward. "Besides, he can't help it if you're not getting any."

A hint of shock flickered over the guy's face before he gave her a dark glare. His cronies let out a few low *ooohs*. Meg had to resist the urge to roll her eyes at their behaviour.

The guy she was facing off with raised his shoulders up in an attempt to intimidate her. "You wanna say that again?"

"Didn't you hear me?" Meg asked. "I said, he can't help it if you can't get laid. Don't take your frustration out on him."

This time, there was no echo of response from his dumb friends. They all glared at her and began to swarm closer. She heard the boy let out a sound of protest from behind them, but they all ignored him. Meg didn't back down. Before any more words could be spoken, the bell gave a loud shrill. The main guy stuck a finger into her face. "You better watch yourself, slut."

Meg didn't respond. Slowly, he and his friends backed away from her. The ones holding photos threw them down on the ground before they all stalked off towards the school's entrance. A few of them turned back to shoot her dirty looks or flip her off.

This morning just keeps getting better, she thought.

Relaxing her stance and taking a quick breath, Meg turned to look at the boy beside her. He looked suspicious and maybe a little confused. "You didn't have to do that," he mumbled.

"And they didn't have to be mean to you. If they can do whatever they want, so can I." Meg gave him a firm look before she glanced at the ground. Without a second thought, she crouched down and began to gather up his photographs. The boy bent over and snatched a few, stuffing them back into a folder. When they stood up, Meg looked at the pictures in her hands. They portrayed a variety of things: a forest, a close-up of a melting candle, a delicate hand flitting over a barbed wire fence. Not a single risqué image in sight. She looked up at him. "These are really good."

The boy took them from her and shoved them into his folder. He didn't meet her eyes, and turned towards the school. "You don't have to say that to try to make me feel better or whatever."

"Again," Meg responded. "I said it because I wanted to. They actually are good." The boy glanced at her quickly before looking away again. He gave a little half-shrug.

"Thanks," he muttered. With that, he began to walk quickly towards the entrance of the school.

"Hey, wait!" Meg hurried to catch up with him. He didn't slow his pace, but looked at her when she caught up. "Listen, can you tell me how to get to the counsellor's office? I'm supposed to meet her."

He led her into the building, his squinting eyes glancing around at the stragglers left in the hallway. Probably keeping an eye out for more trouble-makers. The move looked instinctual. Meg clenched her jaw at the thought. The boy gave a slight sigh and paused long enough to answer her. "The counsellor's a *he*. And his office is down there," he pointed to the nearest hallway. "To the left."

Meg gave him a smile, lifting her bag higher onto her shoulder. "Thanks. See you around."

Her new friend gave her an uncomfortable look before walking off.

"*Yeah, see you around,*" Meg mumbled in a low tone when he was out of earshot. "*Thanks for helping me out, by the way.* Hey, no problem! I'm Meg. *Nice to meet you; I'm a rude photographer!*"

She shook her head and walked in the direction the guy had pointed. Hopefully she wouldn't be too late and get in trouble before she had even started the school day. Her mom would just *love* to hear that.

The counsellor's office was right about where her new friend had said it was. The golden embossed lettering on the door's glass pane read: Ashely Davis, Counsellor. Megan took a quick breath, readied a bright smile, and knocked firmly on the door.

Twenty minutes later, Megan was sitting in the back row of her first class. She'd gone through the 'Class, we have a new student' spiel and was now in the 'Students attempting to not-so-subtly check her out' stage. The teacher – whose name she'd promptly forgotten – was explaining the "nuances of Shakespearean theatrics" in a monotonous voice. Megan took careful notes and ignored the glances thrown at her.

Her subsequent classes passed in much the same way. Boring teachers talking about boring things. Bored students eyeing her and looking away when she turned towards them. Her slim hands taking notes in small, looped handwriting. Girls whispering to each other and acting

innocent when the teacher called them out on it. Boys scribbling on their notebooks and showing it to their friends, who smothered laughter at what was probably a crude sketch. It was nearly the same as her old school.

So far, there was not a single person whom Meg thought she might want to spend more than five minutes speaking to. Of course, she was friendly to the people she sat next to. She introduced herself and tried to remember their names. There was a Frances and a Grace and a Brian and a Jill. But she couldn't quite remember which was which.

The issue wasn't helped by the fact that every second person she passed would grin and snicker to the person beside them. A few guys pointed and leered at her and laughed. She ignored them all. Clearly the incident in the parking lot had already had its run through the rumour mill. Megan would probably care about her reputation if it weren't for the fact that she didn't really care about any of the people around her. Besides, soon enough, it wouldn't be her alleged sexual activities which defined her.

She strode confidently to her second period, anticipation crawling up her neck. The school map which the counsellor had given her showed her next classroom at the back of the school, in the same short hallway as the janitor's closet. The door was at the end of the hall, and the placard next to it read: Room 203, Film & Television.

Meg felt a wide smile threatening to break out on her face. This was the one thing she'd been looking forward to all day. When she'd been enrolling in Hawkins, she'd felt pure elation and relief flood her system when she saw that they had this class. If she had to leave behind her favourite class at her old school, at least this school offered the same one. It was a step in her plan: get some film knowledge under her belt. When she started at film school, she intended to be prepared.

As she reached to open the door, the sound of footsteps rounding the corner caused her to turn around. A girl with short black hair and heavily-lined eyes approached her with a casual smirk. When she stopped just short of stepping on Meg's toes, Meg realised that the top of her head barely reached the girl's shoulders. The girl's smile didn't falter. "Honestly," she said, her voice low-pitched and surly, "I am so

glad to finally have another girl in this class. You should hear some of the things these idiots say in here." She adopted a conspiratorial expression. "Maybe now we have a chance at fighting back."

Usually, Meg was adept at social interaction. But in the face of this tall, beautiful, darkly-intelligent girl, Meg wasn't sure how to respond. The girl looked at her expectantly, her easy smile in contrast to her challenging eyes. She seemed to be waiting for Meg to declare her allegiance to her cause. Meg mustered a smile. "Absolutely."

This seemed to please the girl. She took a step back and her posture relaxed. Meg felt as though she'd just passed some sort of test. The girl's smile became more friendly and less intimidating. "I'm Samantha. Some people call me Sam. I don't really care. And you're the new girl that insulted Tommy H. this morning."

Now that Samantha wasn't standing two inches away from her face, Meg found speaking much easier. "I prefer to go by Meg," she quipped.

Samantha nodded. "Well, Meg, welcome to hell." With that, she led Megan into the classroom.

The Film & Television room was cramped, warm, and smelled like the inside of a smoker's lungs. There was a grand total of ten desks facing a chalkboard and white screen. The lights hanging from the ceiling were dim and one of them flickered pathetically.

Samantha led Meg to the front row and plunked herself and her books down without preamble. Meg noticed that Samantha's name was crudely scratched into the desk. Meg gingerly sat in the adjacent seat. She flicked her eyes around the room.

There were a few guys scattered around the desks. Meg and Samantha were the only ones sitting together. Most of them looked pasty and moody; not too unlike Meg's previous Film & TV class. One guy caught her eyes and gave her a once over with a suspicious expression. He glanced at the back of Samantha's head, then back at Meg. Slowly he gave her a slight nod. Meg turned back towards her new ally, who gave her a solid smile.

Somebody smelled strongly of marijuana. Or maybe that was just the room's general musk.

Meg took a moment to open her notebook and draw up a layout, carefully numbering the date on the page's corner. Then she sat back in her chair, and waited.

A small snort from her right caught her attention. A lanky, greasy-looking dude was sitting at the end of her row, leaning against the wall. "Newbie thinks we're actually going to learn something. This isn't some preppy, rich-kid school."

Samantha leaned across Meg's desk to frown at him. "Lay off, Meyers." She slumped back into her seat. "But seriously," she said to Meg. "Greg probably won't show up. He barely makes it to class on a good day. First day back from break?" She shook her head. "He's probably nursing a hangover somewhere."

Great, Meg thought. When you think it can't get any worse...

She released a deep sigh. "So the chances of this class actually being worth it are...?"

"Slim to none," Samantha answered with a grin. "It's basically just a free period. Greg will show up every once in a while, give us a run-down on test answers, and pass everybody."

Meg restrained the urge to growl. "I already have a free period," she grumbled. This town was ruining her plan. Of course, she'd already intended to make a trip to the library to pick up some resources on the film industry and do her own studying, but it was helpful to have someone guide her through it. Clearly that wouldn't be happening here. She reluctantly pulled out the copy of *Macbeth* she'd received in her English class and settled in to adventure through Scotland for the next forty minutes. Her English teacher had explained that they only needed to have the first scene read for the next lesson, but Meg wasn't about to waste time that could be spent getting ahead.

Thankfully, the time passed quickly. Samantha had spent it sketching in her notebook and batting away pieces of paper the boys threw at the girls. When the bell rang, Meg ran her fingers through her hair,

making sure to dislodge any pieces she'd missed. She and Samantha exited the room together.

"Any chance you've got Chemistry next?" Samantha asked. Meg shook her head. "Bummer. I could use an ally in that class. When do you have lunch? Fourth?"

Meg nodded with a wry grin. "Yeah. Did you need an ally in that too?"

A snort that may have been a smothered laugh escaped Samantha. "Not particularly. But you can hang with me and a couple friends if you want."

A genuine smile broke out on Meg's face. "Sounds good."

Okay, not good.

Apparently somewhere between the Film & TV room and the Geography room, Meg's school map had gotten lost.

And now she was lost.

The bell had rung a few minutes ago – signalling the beginning of Meg's lunch period – and Meg had been ducking down halls and peering into doors without success. "Ridiculous," she chided herself as she dodged a group of cheerleaders. This school was tiny! It shouldn't be this hard to find the cafeteria. She had memorised the layout of the entire town, but she couldn't find the cafeteria? "Ridiculous." She should have taken time to commit the school to memory. *Rookie mistake.*

She pushed past a few kids with a frown. "Hey, watch it!" Meg didn't bother to reply.

Suddenly, her eyes caught on a pair of figures standing at the end of a row of lockers. There was a girl in a pink sweater leaning against a locker. Meg recognised the boy standing stiffly beside her. She quickened her pace and stepped up to them.

The girl's blue eyes narrowed at her as the boy turned to her with squinting eyes. "Porn guy," she greeted him with a smile before

looking at the girl. "And you must be the slut girlfriend."

The boy frowned, but a glint appeared in the girl's eyes. "And *you* must be the new girl sleeping with my boyfriend."

Meg grinned. "Megan."

A smile tugged at the girl's lips. Her boyfriend eyed them both, his suspicious expression replaced by uncertainty. "I'm Nancy. And this is Jonathan."

"Nice to put a name to a face," Meg replied, nodding at Jonathan. He nodded back.

Nancy shifted her stance, her smile fading a touch. "Jonathan told me about this morning. That was nice of you. Although, I don't think it did you much help."

Meg gave a casual shrug. "I don't really care what these losers think." Nancy's and Jonathan's faces both conveyed disbelief, though Nancy tried to disguise it. Meg grew uncomfortable with their scrutinizing gazes. She straightened her shoulders. "Listen, I'm trying to find the cafeteria. Can you just point the way?"

"Oh, yeah, of course," Nancy smiled and jerked her thumb towards the hall behind her. "It's back there on the left. Double doors. Can't miss it."

"Thanks," Meg said and went to step away. Nancy shifted forward.

"Not very many people actually go there," she noted. Meg stopped and raised a brow. "We're allowed to leave the grounds during lunch and free periods, so the cafeteria's never very busy."

"Okay," Meg intoned. She wasn't quite sure why Nancy was telling her this. Should she be meeting Samantha somewhere else? Was there a place where everyone got food and Meg should know about it?

Nancy glanced at Jonathan, whose brows were furrowed, before turning a kind smile on Meg. "We were about to go to a diner. You can come along if you want."

Surprise lined Megan's features. She took a second to consider the offer. Go eat a decent meal with a shy kid and his nice girlfriend or try and find Samantha and her mystery friends. She smiled at Nancy. "I will, if you don't mind."

She had directed the *if you don't mind* more at Jonathan than his girlfriend, but Nancy's face broke out into a wide grin. "Of course not. We'll give you a ride, too." Jonathan gave her wry look. Nancy looked abashed. "Er, *Jonathan* will give you a ride."

For a moment, Meg thought that perhaps she should withdraw from the invitation. Perhaps he really was just shy, but it seemed like Jonathan didn't want her to come. Eating with them sounded nice, but she definitely didn't want to waste her time with someone that didn't even want her around. She shifted her weight onto her other foot and looked him in the eye. "Are you sure you want me to come? I really don't mind eating here."

Jonathan's brows raised, seemingly surprised by her direct manner. He glanced quickly at Nancy, who gave him a firm look. Looking back at Meg, he gave her a small smile. "As long as you like burgers, it's not a big deal."

Ignoring her sense of relief, Meg stepped back. "Then lead the way."

The ride to the diner was short and Nancy spent most of the time interrogating Megan under the pretence of curiosity. Maybe she was just being paranoid, but it seemed like Nancy was trying to determine whether or not Megan was trustworthy. It was kind of odd for a high school girl.

Nancy was in the front passenger's seat, turned so that she could look Meg in the eye. Her smile appeared genuine, but her blue eyes were sharp. "So, you're a senior?"

"Yeah."

"Why did you move halfway through your senior year?"

"My mom wanted to live closer to her sister and couldn't wait any longer, I guess." It wasn't a lie, just a half-truth. Megan figured it

wouldn't go over very well if she told her new friends that her mother moved them here as a punishment for Meg's actions.

"Who's your aunt?"

"Claudia Henderson."

At this, Nancy's brows raised. "Really? My little brother is friends with Dustin."

Meg did her best not to frown. She remembered her first night in town, when Dustin had complained to one of his friends about how awful she is. She forced an interested expression. "Small world. What's your brother's name? Dustin's talked about a few of his friends."

"Mike," Nancy answered. A small smile touched her lips. "He's like the ringleader of their little group." Jonathan gave a quiet huff of laughter, and Nancy grinned at him before she turned back to Meg.

Meg reinforced the pleasant look on her face. Dustin had called his radio friend Lucas, not Mike. "I don't think he's mentioned Mike to me. Although we haven't really talked that much."

"Dustin's a neat kid." Meg tried to seem nonchalant. However, Nancy was more intuitive than Meg had originally taken her for. Without missing a beat or dropping her sweet smile, she asked, "Do you two get along?"

There was a beat of silence as Meg hesitated. Clearly Nancy thought Dustin was the bee's knees, so Meg didn't want to offend her by saying that she thought her cousin was The Worst. But Nancy had a little brother; surely she understood how annoying kids could be. Meg looked into Nancy's keen eyes. She gave a casual shrug. "We just don't really know each other that well. We're adjusting to being in each other's space all the time."

"That's a no," Nancy retorted. Her smile finally dropped, but her eyes held a glint in them. "I get it. Boys are annoying." Meg found herself releasing a breath and nodding.

"Ouch," Jonathan muttered.

Nancy rolled her eyes. "Present company excluded," she amended. "But, Dustin really isn't that bad. Give him a chance."

Megan wanted to be affronted, to tell this stranger that she didn't have the right to be telling Meg how to treat her own cousin. She wanted to say that their dislike wasn't her fault and that *he started it*. But the mature, less childish part of her brain whispered that Nancy probably did know Dustin better than she did. They were never around each other very much as kids, and hadn't spoken since that ugly Thanksgiving. So, Megan swallowed and nodded. "I'll try."

This seemed to appease Nancy and she ceased her interrogation. Her expression relaxed and she turned back around in her seat just in time for them to pull into the parking lot of the diner.

Jonathan slid the car into park. "My brother is friends with Dustin, too."

He was looking at the diner and didn't really seem to be addressing anyone in particular. Meg wasn't quite sure what to do with this information. "Uh, cool. Kinda crazy how things are connected."

Jonathan gave a quick nod, and opened his door. Nancy, who didn't seem to think his behaviour was at all odd, climbed out as well.

Meg took a second to collect her thoughts. She had gotten herself into a lunch with a nosy, keen girl and a socially awkward boy, and yet, Meg felt like the odd one out. Nancy's questions and comments about Dustin left Meg feeling like the bad guy. And something about Jonathan's random comment seemed deeper than what it appeared to be. For whatever reason, these teenagers seemed to be protective of Megan's obnoxious cousin. Which was totally random, right? Although, she didn't have any siblings. And she'd never lived in a town as small as this one. Maybe everyone looked after each other, protected their own. It was a nice thought, if a little foreign to her.

She took a breath and climbed out of the car, shutting the door while shooting a hopefully-not-awkward smile to her companions. They glanced at her, then at each other. Something in their body language changed as they locked eyes. In sync, they turned and walked towards the restaurant. *Great*, Meg thought. *They can telepathically*

communicate. If she could just get through this with her sanity intact, it would be a win.

As she followed the couple into the diner, Meg decided that her best course of action would be to stay as in control as possible. She was outnumbered in unfamiliar territory and she had weak spots that needed to be guarded. If she could control the situation, her chances of exiting this encounter with both her reputation and sanity untarnished were high. Nancy had caught her off-guard in the car. Meg couldn't let it happen again.

Of course, she wasn't controlling in the obnoxious kind of way. She didn't demand that she choose which booth they sit in or order their food for them or provide a list of appropriate conversation topics. But she did try to ask questions which focused on them and couldn't be turned back around onto her. Getting people to talk about themselves was a sure-fire way to deflect attention. As Meg settled into the booth, she realised that perhaps Nancy had been using the same tactic in the car.

After they had ordered, Meg settled her arms on the table and smiled at Nancy and Jonathan. "So," she chatted. "You two *are* actually dating, right? It wasn't just a joke that Freckle-Face made?"

Both of the teenagers grinned at her comment, though Jonathan's was a little more faint. Meg decided that he must take a while to warm up to people. *Maybe he's as suspicious as I am*. "His name is Tommy, although I guess Freckle-Face is also accurate," Nancy joked. She cast a quick, sweet glance over at Jonathan. "And, yeah, we are dating."

"Cute," Meg commented. And they were cute. Their shoulders were touching and they didn't even seem to realise that they glanced at each other every five seconds. Meg worried that her teeth would rot with all the sweetness on display. "How long have you been together?"

The couple answered at the same time, which also would have been cute if they hadn't given completely different answers.

"A couple of months," Nancy said with a casual expression.

"Since November fourth," Jonathan answered with the clearest voice he'd used since Meg had met him.

Nancy turned her wide, blue eyes onto Jonathan and her lips parted slightly. Jonathan looked back at her with furrowed brows.

Well, this was awkward. *At least it's got nothing to do with me for once*, Meg thought. When neither teen said anything further, Meg decided to try and lighten things up. "I bet it just kind of happened, right? Just spur of the moment? Happened so fast it seemed like it's been that way forever?"

Jonathan slowly turned to look at her, but Nancy latched onto the excuse. "Yeah, definitely. I mean, neither of us were really trying to make it happen. It just – happened." Meg nodded. When Nancy put a hand on Jonathan's, flashing him those baby-blues, a tiny, fond smile touched his lips.

"Yeah," he agreed.

So sweet it hurts. Meg leaned back in the booth, as if to distance herself from the love-fest in the seat across from her. "Had you guys been friends before-hand?"

Nancy grinned. "We'd been friends for a while. Even if Jonathan liked to pretend we weren't." Jonathan let out a noise of protest and Nancy just elbowed him good-naturedly. "I think that he liked me all along, but he won't admit it."

That made Meg laugh, and Jonathan developed a mischievous glint in his eyes. He spoke to Meg, but was looking at his girlfriend. "Nancy was actually dating someone before we got together. But she really liked me."

Nancy gasped let out a startled, breathy laugh, as though surprised he would say such a thing. "I didn't *know* that I did!"

"Sure," Jonathan teased. Nancy smothered a smile and shoved his arm, which only made him grin.

Meg stifled the urge to roll her eyes at their antics. "Sounds to me like you both liked each other. Must've sucked to be the other guy."

Clearly, it had been the wrong thing to say. All traces of amusement disappeared from Nancy's and Jonathan's faces and they sent each other a quick glance. Nancy cleared her throat before leaning casually on the table. "We actually still hang out with him. It ended well between us, so we're all still friends."

Way to go, Meg. Suggest that she stomped on some guy's heart and simultaneously insult her friend. Real nice.

"Oh, that's cool," Meg tried to amend. "I'm glad it all worked out."

Nancy nodded and looked at Jonathan, who surprisingly nodded as well. Even with Nancy's statement, Meg still thought that maybe Jonathan wouldn't call his girlfriend's ex his friend. But he seemed genuine. "He's actually in your grade, Meg," Nancy said. "He went on vacation with his parents and won't be back till the end of the week, but I'll have to introduce you to him once he gets here."

Meg gave her an interested smile. "Sure." *If I can decide whether or not you guys are weird between now and then.* She didn't need more weirdness in her life.

The waitress came and set three plates of burgers and fries on the table. Meg was half-way through thanking her when the sound of a loud engine outside of the diner caught her attention, along with nearly everyone in the diner. Meg peered outside the window and saw a familiar-looking blue Camaro settle half-way between two parking spaces. Her brows knit together as she watched the mullet-wearing jerk from the gas station climb out of his car.

A snort from the waitress made all three teens look over at her. "Here comes Mr Fun," she grumbled before trudging over to the counter. Meg looked over at Nancy and Jonathan, who wore identical frowns on their faces as they watched the guy strut into the diner like he owned the place. People he passed seemed to send him an irritated glance before ignoring him. Did everyone in this town hate the guy? After his stunt at the gas station, Meg couldn't say she was surprised.

"Who is that?" She asked. When Nancy and Jonathan returned their attention to her, she jerked her head in his direction. "He was at the gas station I stopped at this morning." Her nose wrinkled as she

shook her head. "A real class act. First person in town to flip me off."

The three glanced back long enough to see Billy give the waitress a once-over before winking at her. The woman scoffed and strode away from him. Billy was unperturbed; he plucked a toothpick from a can on the counter and stuck it in his mouth. He eyed a few other women in the diner, but just rolled his eyes, clearly unimpressed. Meg felt her lip curl.

Nancy shook her head as she cast another glare in the guy's direction. "His name's Billy Hargrove. He's in your grade, too. He's..." Nancy trailed off, as though unable to come up with the right term for his kind of scum.

"The worst," Jonathan supplied. He cast Meg a wry look. "He's friends with Tommy."

"Great," Meg hummed. "So I managed to tick off two of the school's biggest douchebags on my first day. Go me."

When they shot Billy another glance, he was leaned against the counter impatiently, his eyes looking into the gap behind the counter showing the kitchen. "Come on!" He shouted, hands on his hips. "I don't have all day, sweetheart."

Jonathan frowned. "Must be here to collect his flavour of the month," he muttered.

A slim, blonde figure trotted out from a back room, sending Billy an irritated look, but still allowing him to sling his arm around her neck. She sent him a sultry gaze from beneath her lashes as he said something to her in a low voice. Across from Meg, Nancy pursed her lips. "More like flavour of the week."

Billy and the girl exited the diner, and Meg thought she could hear a sigh of relief echo around the booths. She swirled a fry into some ketchup. "Maybe I'm crazy, but I don't get what's so great. Dude's hair looks like he washes it with hairspray."

Her comment made Nancy release a short laugh and Jonathan outright grinned at her. "I think it's the jeans," Nancy said. "I can't

make it through a class without hearing a girl whispering about Billy Hargrove's rear end."

Jonathan rolled his eyes and sent his girlfriend a knowing glance. "If only they knew."

Meg furrowed her brows at him. "What do you mean? Is he crazy or something?"

Both Nancy and Jonathan immediately grew sombre. They shared another telepathy look. Meg raised a brow, looking between them. Finally, Nancy gave an overly casual shrug. "He's done some pretty bad stuff to some pretty good people."

Her vague, ominous words had Meg staring quizzically at her, but Nancy just shook her head, squeezing her eyes shut before looking back at her. She flashed her a pleasant smile. "So, do you like movies?" Any shred of her mysterious attitude disappeared from her face. Meg eyed her for a moment, calculating. There was more to this girl than she'd originally thought. She was keen and shrewd and fun. Meg found herself liking her. Hopefully not against her better judgment.

After perhaps too long of a pause, Meg gave the girl a slight smile and nodded. "Yeah, I love them. I want to go into the film industry, actually." She shrugged as though it was an inconsequential detail, and not the hope upon which her every happiness was hinged. "Why?"

Nancy gestured to Jonathan. "A couple of us are going to the movies tonight, just to do something fun before all the school stress kicks in. You can come along, if you want."

Surprise registered in Meg's mind. Apparently, though Meg had been less than charming thus far, Nancy had made the same decision about Meg which she'd made about her: to try this whole *friends* thing out. A genuine smile spread across Meg's face. "Yeah. Yeah, that'd be fun. I'll be there."

3. Chapter 3

Hello again!

Thank you so much for all of the kind support and reviews for the last two chapters! They've really motivated me to continue this story.

This is the longest chapter so far. And I hope you all like it because Meg is meeting someone I'm sure you've been waiting for. So strap in! Let's get this started.

Disclaimer: I own nothing, save for Meg, her mother, and any mistakes.

Shoving her red Ford Escort into *park*, Meg huffed and slumped back against her seat. It was Friday afternoon and she was sitting outside of Hawkins Middle School, almost directly across from the front entrance.

Out of the corner of her eye, she could see her prized possession, her closest friend, her keeper of dreams: a leather-bound notebook sitting on the passenger's seat, its worn edges just asking to be caressed. It had been a Christmas gift to herself. Finally, she had a place to keep all of her plans and ideas. Even though she'd only had it for a few weeks, she'd already filled a considerable amount of its pages with her passionate obsession: a film script.

She shoved the notebook into her glovebox. Her work would just have to wait. "So typical," she muttered. "Thanks, Aunt Claudia. I just love taking care of your kid for you." She crossed her arms, glaring at the brown building. Why had she even agreed to this?

That morning, before Meg had left for school, the three Henderson women sat around the kitchen table. Dustin had slept over at one of his friends' houses; Meg couldn't say she wasn't glad for a break from his perpetual, sassy remarks. Her aunt had been chattering away while her mother read the paper and responded in mere *mms* and *ahhs*. Meg, on the other hand, was struggling to ignore the woman's babbling while she poured milk into her cereal.

"And of course I just couldn't resist the two-for-one deal on the Eggos.

Dustin hasn't really eaten them very much recently, but then again I haven't really been buying them, have I?" She clucked as she made her coffee. Meg fought back a cringe as she counted the obscene amount of sugar cubes the woman was dropping into her mug. They made tiny *bloops* as they dropped into the brown abyss; coffee splashed over the rim, but Claudia paid it no heed. "Speaking of the supermarket, I bought so much for dinner tonight. It's Friday, and Dustin and I have had Meatloaf Friday since he was just a little tyke! Long before he got his beautiful teeth." Claudia turned to Meg with a sickeningly bright smile. "Meg, did you notice Dustin's wonderful pearly whites? I don't remember if he showed you. Or maybe you haven't noticed them yet; you have been quite the busy little bee since you got here!"

Forcing a pleasant smile onto her face, Meg nodded. "Yeah, Aunt Claudia, I saw his teeth." *Every single one of the eighty-five times you've pointed them out.* "They're great."

Her aunt hadn't seemed to have heard a word she had said. "Where have you been getting off to, dear? You hadn't been here barely a day before you were wizzing off around the town. I'm surprised you made friends so quickly!"

This caused Virginia to make a strangled sound; Meg narrowed her eyes at her. She was sure that it had been a poor attempt at covering a laugh. The woman rested her chin on her hand, subtly covering her grin. Meg looked pointedly at her mother before turning back to her aunt. "I did hang out with some people on Monday night," she answered. After she'd seen a movie with Jonathan and Nancy and a few of their friends (it had been the *Breakfast Club*. Meg was surprised by how much she'd liked it), they had invited her to a bowling night on Saturday. She couldn't remember the last time she'd bowled, but she agreed to go along. They were a good group. Even Jonathan had smiled at her when she'd waved goodbye. "But most of the other times I've just been driving around town. You know, just getting a lay of the land and all that. Adjusting to my surroundings." *Staying out of this stuffy house.*

"Well," Claudia said with another pleasant smile. "That's very practical of you, dear. As long as you're home in time for dinner, it doesn't bother me at all." Meg suppressed the urge to ask her aunt

why anything she does should bother her. Claudia's face brightened as her mind surged off in another direction. "Speaking of dinner! I'm going to make my special meatloaf tonight in honour of your first Friday in Hawkins. I hope you'll like it; I'm sure Dustin will!" A slight frown settled over her face. "As long as *he's* home in time for dinner. Most afternoons he zips off with his friends right away. It would be nice if he could spend the afternoon with us, wouldn't it? Oh, but I can't pick him up from school. I get out of work too late!"

Virginia put her newspaper down, looked at Meg with a meddling glint in her eye, and let her lips spread into a sly grin. "I'm sure Megan wouldn't mind picking Dustin up," she said in a voice as sugary sweet as Claudia's coffee. Meg's mouth tightened into a line, sending her mom a silent message. *Don't do this to me.* Her mother just smiled brightly and turned to her sister. "They do get off at the same time, right?"

Claudia smiled. "Yes, they do." She turned to Meg. "You'd have to leave school a little early, but it would be so lovely if you'd get little Dustin. Would you, dear?"

Looking from her aunt's sunny face to her mother's sly smirk, Meg felt trapped. *Curse my desire to please. And my mother's family-oriented machinations.* She forced a smile onto her face. "Of course, Aunt Claudia. I'll have him home by three."

Her aunt beamed and thanked her profusely. And so, here she was: sitting across the street from Hawkins Middle School in her beat up car at two-twenty-three, waiting for her dork of a cousin to come out so she could drive him home. All because she didn't like to say no. Or disappoint. Or give her mother a reason to lecture her. "What a push over," she groaned to herself.

Seven minutes later, just as the bell rang, a burgundy car zoomed past her and forced its way into the tiny space by the curb directly in front of the school. Meg frowned as she looked at it. Whoever was driving was probably a jerk – who speeds that much in a school zone? – but she had to admit that it was an excellent parallel park. The windows were down, and loud synth was pouring out into the street. She squinted into the car and saw what must have been a guy around her age, maybe a little older. His head was bobbing along to

the music. Meg cracked her window and recognized the sounds of Tears for Fears. *He drives like a madman*, she thought. *But he's got good taste.*

The door to the school burst open, and kids began to pour out. Meg sighed, figuring that Dustin probably wouldn't recognize her car, and climbed out to lean against the closed door. Crossing her arms over her jean jacket, she scanned the crowds, looking for his dumb tri-coloured hat.

As she watched, her nose wrinkled at all the kids rushing about. They were running, talking, yelling, pushing, probably bullying. *I almost forgot how much I hate kids.* A small voice in her head disagreed, but Meg pushed it away. Kids were loud and messy and so overwhelmingly *active*. She'd taken a baby-sitting job last summer and if it wasn't for the fact that the parents were rich and gave her a ridiculously large cheque, she would've quit within the first two weeks. She'd hardly been able to hear herself think, let alone-

There! Dustin's dorky hat was bobbing in the crowd, headed almost straight towards her. There was a parting amongst the kids enough for her to see his face and the fact that he was with the same little group of kids from Monday. He seemed to look straight at her, and she began to send him a wave. *A beckoning wave*, she told herself. *A wave that says 'hurry up' not 'hi, good to see you'.* But then he and his friends made a beeline for a car that was definitely not hers.

It was the head-bobbing, somewhat-decent-parker guy's car. A total random. The kids didn't even hesitate. They threw themselves into the vehicle – Dustin sat shotgun, for crying out loud – and then they were off. The guy shot out away from the school, the beeping of horns following him.

For a second, Meg just stared after it, confused. Then she clenched her jaw. Dustin may have been weird and annoying, but she wasn't about to let him drive off with some random guy to who knows where.

She climbed into her car and took off after him, earning almost the same amount of honking.

Staying close on the guy's tail, Meg had to force herself to unclench her jaw for the sake of her aching gums. The guy was definitely going over the speed limit, and through the rear window she could see the kids moving around; completely unsafe. Questions flew around her head. Who did this guy think he was, driving like a maniac with kids in his car? For that matter, why were the kids even in his car? And where were they going?

Finally, miraculously, the guy pulled into the parking lot of some arcade without getting into an accident. The burgundy car halted in front of the entrance, and as the doors swung open, Meg hurriedly pulled into a parking spot, ignored her crappy parking job, and marched towards it. She saw Dustin climb out. "Hey!" All four of the kids turned to look at her. She stomped up to them. "Dustin, what are you doing here?"

Her cousin frowned. "What are *you* doing here? Are you *following* me?"

Ignoring him, she strode around the car to the driver's window. She had tried to go for a nice tap, but she pretty much just smacked the glass. The guy inside had a confused, somewhat comical expression on his face. He rolled the window down. "Uh, is there a problem?"

"A problem?" Meg asked. "Yeah, there's a problem. Who are you? And why are you driving my cousin all over town? Also, for a guy who's got four kids in his car, you drive like a maniac!" She put her hands on her hips, glaring.

This caused the guy to frown, and he shoved his door open, forcing Meg to step back to avoid being hit by it. As he stood, Meg realised how much taller he was than her. *And good-looking*, a voice whispered. She told the voice to put a lid on it.

The guy gave her a questioning look. "Why are you being crazy? I work at the record store across the street, and I gave these guys a ride here. What's the big deal?"

"What's the big deal?" Meg repeated. She let out an exaggerated scoff. "You're some random guy driving minors around like a crazy person!"

"Some guy?" This time he was glaring at her. "I've known all of these kids for over a year, now. I've never seen you in my life. You're just some psychotic angry chick following my car and insulting my driving."

She opened her mouth to tell him where he could stick his driving, when Dustin stepped up to them. "Can you both just calm down?" He huffed, gesturing around them. "Way to make a scene, guys." This made Meg look around, noticing for the first time the amount of people watching them. Thankfully, they were mostly kids and lame-looking teens, but even so she could feel a slight blush climbing its way across her cheeks. Dustin turned to the guy. "This is my cousin. She just moved here. As you can see, she's a total mouth-breather."

At this, she glared at him. "Says the guy who-"

Dustin cut her off. "Meg, this is Steve. He's Mike's older sister's ex-boyfriend who sometimes gives us rides. He's cool. Unlike some screaming, stalking people who freak out for no reason." Meg's glare didn't relent. Dustin turned to his friends. "Go on in, guys. I'm just gonna get my freak-cousin to chill out."

The other three kids retreated into the safety of their arcade. Meg turned her frown back on the guy in front of her. *Steve*. "You're Dustin's friend's older sister's ex-boyfriend?" The guy nodded, his brow still dipped. Meg gave a disbelieving laugh. "And that's supposed to reassure me because?"

It was Steve's turn to scoff. "You just got here. You don't even seem to know Dustin. What gives you the right to be judging his life?"

At this, Dustin spoke up. "Yeah, Meg. You don't even like me. Why are you here, anyway?"

Both boys looked at her questioningly, each looking severely judgmental. They stood side-by-side with their hands on their hips. Meg suddenly realised she was both out-numbered and an outsider. She took a fraction of a step back, and when she spoke, she forced her tone to be more neutral. "Your mom asked me to pick you up from school. She wants you home for dinner. Didn't think you'd make it in time if you went off with your friends."

Her change in demeanour seemed to make Steve and Dustin relax. Dustin let out a groan. "Meatloaf Fridays. Did she say she was making her special meatloaf?" Meg nodded. Another groan. "There's a payphone in here. Call her and tell her that I'm going to Mike's to work on a school project." He gave her a serious look. "If you value your tastebuds, you should come up with an excuse, too."

"I don't take orders from you, dweeb." This earned her another glare from Steve. *Why's this guy so protective?* Meg took a breath before looking back at her cousin, attempting to be more civil. "Is it really that bad?"

"Remember the roast beef? The meatloaf is worse." This made Meg's nose wrinkle, and Dustin shrugged. "Meat's not her thing. But her pasta redeems her."

Meg let out a small laugh. Her cousin grinned in response. *Stupid, cute, toothy smile.* With an eye-roll, Meg stuffed her hands into her pockets. "Fine, I'll call your mom. But you owe me, dork."

Dustin beamed at her. "Thanks!" He started backing away from her and Steve. "I'm gonna go now. Be nice to Steve." Meg scoffed as he turned to his apparent friend. "Thanks for the ride. Later!" With that, he disappeared inside the gates of geek-haven. Meg shook her head.

Steve cleared his throat, making her look up. His eyebrows were raised slightly. She was reminded once again that he was arguably attractive. From a certain angle. If you like tall, soft-eyed boys. Which she did.

And she had gone all psycho on him.

Meg felt another stupid blush heat her face. She pushed her bangs out of her eyes. "Listen, uh," she began ever so eloquently. "I'm... sorry for going all crazy on you. It's just, you know, my cousin climbed in the car with some random stranger and I'm supposed to be responsible for him and... yeah," she finished lamely, tugging on a strand of her hair.

The guy gave her a slight smile. "I get it. No big deal. Maybe just try not to yell at people; strangers or not."

Meg nodded, looking away as she realised how loud she had been. There was a beat of silence before she drew up her shoulders. "Plus, your driving really is awful so I was rightfully worried by that."

Steve gave a short laugh. "Says you! I saw that parking job; not impressive."

"I was in distress!"

"And I had four really distracting kids in my car!"

"Not when you screeched into a tiny parking spot in front of the middle school." She made a tsk-tsk noise. "You looked like a regular hoodlum, speeding down the street with *Mad World* blaring out of your windows."

This earned her a genuine laugh. As he smiled at her, she found herself grinning back. Steve put an elbow on the hood of his car, leaning against it, dipping his chin down to look at her. "You just moved here; are you going to Hawkins High?"

Meg smiled, adjusting with the change of topic. "Yeah, I started on Monday."

"Cool, me too," Steve answered. His eyes widened. "I mean, I go there, too. Not that I just started." He rubbed the back of his neck and glanced across the street. She followed his gaze to see the record store. "My shift's gonna start in a few minutes."

"Oh, yeah, of course. Sorry for holding you up."

A glint appeared in Steve's eyes and he held up a couple fingers. "That's two apologies I've gotten from you." A grin worked its way across his face. "Any more and I might start asking for a little compensation."

Meg hesitated at his flirtatious tone. She started stepping backwards. "Uh, yeah, that would be... fair." She needed to shut up before she embarrassed herself. She gestured towards the arcade. "I'm gonna go make that get-out-of-a-gross-dinner phone call. Have fun at work."

Was it her imagination, or did he look slightly disappointed that she

didn't flirt back? Either way, he just nodded and opened his car door. "Thanks, you too," Steve said. It took him a split second to realise his mistake. His eyes squeezed closed before he looked back at her. "I'm gonna go now. See you around."

With that, he climbed into his car and sped off. He narrowly missed the curb on his way out of the driveway. His driving really was terrible. As she watched his car pull off, Meg realised she still had a faint smile on her face.

Inside the arcade, she was directed to the payphone in a small side room by some sleazy guy with terrible posture and an even worse personality. When he suggested they do something else in the tiny room, she'd had to shove her hands into her pockets to keep from slugging him. After Meg rather forcibly *shooed* him from the room, the phone call to her aunt was brief. She gave her Dustin's excuse and told her that she'd been invited to a study group and wanted to go. Aunt Claudia had sounded disappointed but told her to have fun. As Meg stepped back into the arcade, a frown settled over her face.

Have fun. She'd be lucky to find something to do in this tiny town.

Meg strode around the arcade, hunting for that tri-coloured hat. Finally, she spotted Dustin and his friends huddled around some game. *Dig Dug*. She stepped up behind the kids. Dustin was hurriedly smashing a button and twisting a joystick. The two boys next to him were yelling; whether it was encouragement or something closer to heckling, Meg couldn't tell. The redheaded girl with them had a smug look on her face. "Face it: you can't even get close to my score."

"Shut up, Max!" Dustin began smacking the button faster. His efforts were in vain; his little avatar was dead within seconds, and a giant *GAME OVER* began flashing on the screen. All three boys groaned. The girl – Max – was smiling.

"Hey, geek squad," Meg said. All four kids whirled around to face her. She looked at each of their faces; they all looked immediately wary of her. Meg settled a stoic expression over her face. She'd seen all of these kids before. They'd come over to Dustin's house earlier in the week, but hadn't stayed for very long. "Isn't there one of you missing? Where's that small kid?"

They all glared at her. "His name's Will," said the kid with the shaggy black hair. "And he's at home. He's sick today."

"Not that you'd care," Dustin grumbled.

Meg didn't know the kid, so she didn't necessarily *care*, but she didn't really *not care*, either. She crossed her arms. "Just tell me where I have to get you from tonight."

This made Dustin look surprised, then he frowned. "You don't have to pick me up. I'd hate for you to go out of your way."

Who raised this sarcastic kid? It couldn't possibly have been Aunt Claudia. "You don't have your bike, numbskull. Were you gonna walk home?"

"I could get a ride."

"From who?"

"Lucas' mom. Or Mike's mom." At this, the other boys looked sceptical. Dustin looked at them. "Guys?"

The shaggy haired kid lifted one shoulder. "Maybe Mrs Sinclair will, but my mom probably won't." Dustin turned to the other kid – Lucas – but he shook his head.

"You live on the other side of town from us, man."

Meg smirked as Dustin scowled. "Just tell me where to pick you up." He begrudgingly gave her the address. "I'll be there at eight."

"Ten," Dustin countered.

"Nine. Or you're walking home." Dustin groaned, but conceded. Meg rolled her eyes. "Why are kids so dramatic?" She reached into her jean pockets as she scowled at them.

"You're the one who screamed your head off at Steve," Dustin said.

The redhead nodded. "Yeah, you were a total psychopath out there."

Meg pulled her hand out of her pocket. "Shut up, nerds." She held her fist out to her cousin. He eyed her suspiciously, and Meg sighed. "Just open your hand, dweeb." He complied, and Meg dumped what was probably three dollars in change in his hand.

Dustin looked up at her, surprised. His friends' faces all expressed various degrees of shock ranging from amusing to hilarious. Meg just turned on her heel and began to walk away before they could see her smirk. "Don't spend it all in one place."

Megan tapped the end of her pencil to her mouth, humming. She was frowning down at her leather-bound notebook. Three more pages were now filled with her looped hand-writing than when she had first put her car into park, found a decent radio channel, and opened her prized possession. The clock told her that she'd been sitting there for nearly two hours, alternating between writing, gazing out of her window, and singing along to the songs she knew.

The page she was gazing at focused on the beginning of her story. The majority of the afternoon had been spent working on the timeline and plot points. Now she was attempting to determine when and how it should begin. It was crucial; the beginning was the hook, the first impression the audience received of her film. It had to be perfect; the tone, the theme, and the pace all had to be just right. But she couldn't seem to get it even a little right. Eventually, she let out a sigh and put her pencil down.

She turned the radio up and looked out the window. Her car was sitting in the lot outside of a park that was edged by woods. Kids were crawling all over a playground, running around laughing and yelling and probably whining. Parents were sitting on benches and pushing swings, talking and smiling and calling out to their children. The air was crisp and cool, but the January temperatures did nothing to deter the families scattered around the park. They were bundled up in thick jackets and scarves and their pink noses and ears were ignored.

The song on the radio suddenly caught Meg's attention. A soft, repetitive guitar, gentle synth, a thick British accent. Its gentle melody washed over her.

Meg's mind drifted to an old, faded memory. It was more of a feeling than a sight. Meg was swinging, her short legs preventing her feet from touching the sand beneath her. Strong, warm hands pushed her through the air and she soared higher and higher with each touch. It was a warm day, and she closed her eyes as she tilted her face towards the sun. She could feel her lips widen into an uncontained smile as she climbed through the air. Perhaps she had called out, a demand to be taken higher. Suddenly hands grabbed her own where they were wrapped around the links of the chains holding her up. Her momentum was cut off and she came to a halt, sitting still and confused in the swing. A solid voice, the clearest part of this ancient memory, told her she could not go any higher. She was not allowed to soar.

"There's a hole in the sky where the sun don't shine and a clock on the wall and it counts my time..."

As Meg watched, parents began to check their watches and call for their children to leave the playground. Instantly, kids were being taken from swings and slides and plastic animals on springs. Families were packing themselves into cars and driving away. Meg glanced at the clock again. Five o'clock. People were leaving to go home and make dinner, to go to other people's homes and eat dinner, to go to restaurants and order dinner. The immediate, unanimous decision to leave seemed choreographed, pre-determined, maybe even preordained. A mass exodus from a small, street-side park.

"There's a song on the air with a love-you line, and a face in the glass and it looks like mine."

Soon, Meg's was the only car sitting in front of the park, with only the song on the radio to keep her company. Her thoughts were swirling as she stared at the empty park. She realised, again, that she was alone. She was alone in her car, she was alone in the parking lot, she was alone in this tiny town. And yet, she didn't feel as lonely as before.

It was a moment, and Meg was utterly enthralled by it.

And then the song ended and was replaced by the radio host, who named the song and the band. The moment ended. But Meg wasn't

about to lose it.

She shifted her car into *drive* and mentally began to plan a course to her destination, recalling street names and stop signs. As she pulled onto the road, she hoped this wouldn't be weird.

McCarthy's Record Store was quiet. Or mostly quiet, at least. It was quiet wherever Hank Grimes was not standing. The man moved noisily through the store, the scent of cigar smoke and beer trailing in his wake. He talked as he moved, criticizing the store's stock, critiquing the records he fingered, correcting the comments made by whatever employee dared to approach him.

Hank Grimes was a demon who haunted McCarthy's and caused as much mayhem as possible whenever he showed himself to the mortals inside the store. He gleefully tortured the employees and scared off customers. His brown hair was long and matted (except for the bald spot on his crown), and he was often sighted wearing a stained wife-beater and jeans that hung so low on his hips that people reported being traumatised just by looking at him. The low *thud* of his dirty sandals hitting the store's carpet could drive out most anyone from the shop. He was currently inflicting ungodly punishment on one Steve Harrington.

"I already told you!" Hank's gravelly voice was raised and his greasy skin was flushed. "I *already have* all of REO Speedwagon. I'm looking for *Boston*. I want their *first album*."

Steve had been dealing with the guy for nearly an hour. Being the only one on shift, he had no one to pass him off to like he normally would. Hank's condescending tone had gradually worn Steve's patience away and now he was on his last nerve. "Yeah, I get it. And I already told *you* that we *don't have* that album. I suggested REO Speedwagon because the bands have a similar sound."

"Do I look like an idiot, kid?" Yes. "I know they sound similar. I *like* the sound. I *understand* the sound. I can even *play* the sound. That's why I want to have all the albums of both." He waved the stack of records in his hand. "Don't tell me stuff about music. You can't tell me anything I don't know." A sneer appeared on Hank's face. He folded his arms over his yellowed shirt. "You probably don't even know

anything about good music. You look like you listen to *pop*."

That was apparently an amazingly witty insult because Hank released a loud laugh. It gave Steve a horrifying view of Hank's yellow teeth, and the stench of his breath assaulted Steve's nose. He forced himself to take a step back; partly to get a hold of his temper and partly to breathe something other than Hank's offensive odour. "Listen, man. You've been here almost an hour. You've got a stack of six records. We don't have the album you're looking for. Just come to the front desk and you can buy what you've got."

"Hey!" Hank shoved a finger at his chest. "Don't talk down to me, kid. I've been listening to music since before you even knew what music was. You probably still don't even know what good music is." He threw the stack of records in his hands down on the table next to him and began backing away. "You know what? You just lost a huge sale. Big mistake."

With that, Hank Grimes, the Demon of McCarthy's Record Store, removed his physical form from the premises. Steve snorted as he picked up the stack of records Hank had left behind. *Good riddance*.

The bell hanging above the front door rang, and Steve heard the tail-end of a heated insult. "-next time, pal!" The door slammed closed, followed by a loud huff.

Steve turned around and was greeted by the sight of wide black eyes under dark bangs and a flushed face framed by thick, short hair. Her frown was familiar; it had been pointed at him a few hours ago. Steve grinned at the girl's glare. "You're not here to yell at me and insult my driving, are you?"

This made Meg's face soften only slightly and she blew a strand of hair out of her face. She ignored his joke and jerked a thumb behind her. "Do you know that guy? Jerk yelled at me for bumping into him. He's the idiot who exited a store *backwards*!"

Steve chuckled. "Yeah, that's Hank. He haunts the store and yells about 'good music'. A real ray of sunshine."

"Well, he can stick his opinions where the sun *doesn't* shine." The girl

said heatedly, shaking her head as she looked back at the door. Steve hid his grin at the amount of aggression being exhibited in such a tiny person. When she looked up at him, she must have noticed his amusement because a slight blush crawled up her pale cheeks. "Listen," she said, taking a breath. She began twisting the ring on her finger. "I know what this looks like. And it's not, okay? That would be dumb."

Steve raised his eyebrows. "So, you're not here to buy a record?"

This made her frown in confusion. "What? No, that's exactly what I'm here for."

"That's what most people do when they come here." Steve gestured at the rows around him. "Is that not what this looks like?"

She let out a sigh. "It looks like I met you earlier and now I *just happen* to come to the record store within a few hours, when I knew you'd be here. Like I was coming in to see you or something. Which I'm not." She looked away for a second, then straightened her shoulders and met his eye. Steve was struggling not to laugh; her serious expression made him restrain himself.

"Oh, yeah, that's exactly what I was thinking." He turned around and began casually placing the records Hank had picked up back in their rightful place. "Most girls go to record stores to check out the hot employees, right? I'm a little hurt that you're not here just to see me. I thought I'd made a great impression when you yelled at me for giving your cousin a ride."

He heard her breathe out a laugh. "Sorry to burst your bubble."

Steve turned to the next aisle and looked back at her. Her posture had relaxed and she had a soft smile on her face. He grinned at her and put another record back. "Now that we've established why you're *not* here, let's talk about why you *are*."

She nodded, adopting a serious expression as she began to scan the records around her. "I have a music emergency."

As he moved to replace another record, Steve made sure his face was

just as grave. "Should I call the music police?"

Meg looked up from the records and shot him a look. "You're hilarious."

"I try."

She must have decided that she was on the wrong aisle because she moved over to the row across from him. Her brows dipped as she searched through the records. Her slender fingers flicked quickly between the albums and she pulled her lower lip between her teeth. She certainly had the grave attitude associated with emergencies. "I was listening to the radio, working on some stuff, and I was sitting outside of this park." She picked up an album and looked it over. "This looks interesting," she noted. "But it's not what I'm after." She set it aside and continued. Steve turned to face away from her and returned another record. "So I'm sitting there, thinking, and then this song comes on. And it was a moment."

At this, Steve looked over his shoulder. "A moment?"

"You know," she insisted, still searching through records. "A moment." Steve's bewilderment must have shown on his face, because when she glanced up at him, Meg let out a breath and straightened up. She spoke slowly as she began, as though she was attempting to organise her thoughts into simple terms. "Sometimes you listen to a song and whether it's the situation you're in, or what you're feeling, or what you're thinking about..." She paused and a soft, open expression slid onto her face. Her wide eyes looked away from him, her thoughts no longer confined within the record store. "You have a moment with that song. It doesn't have to make you cry or dance or *change* you, although any of that can happen, I guess. It just... means something. To you. And whenever you hear that song again, you're hearing that moment. You feel what it made you feel or think what it made you think." Meg stopped and looked at him once more. "Has that never happened to you?"

The way she had described it and the earnest, almost wistful expression she wore made Steve wish that it had happened to him. But he honestly didn't think it had. So he shook his head. Her eyes seemed to turn sorrowful at his answer. Steve didn't like the change.

"I mean, don't get me wrong," he found himself saying. He set the last couple of records down and turned to face her, leaning against the table behind him. "I like music; I work in a record store." He wasn't sure why he was trying to justify himself. But Meg still looked close to disappointment, so his mouth kept running. "And I listen to a lot of music. All the time. I've practically got my own soundtrack to life. My own, uh, life soundtrack. Because I listen to so much music." Steve suppressed a wince at the idiocy flowing from his mouth. Whatever had been in Meg's eyes melted away to reveal pure amusement. He waited for her to tease him or at least acknowledge how dumb he sounded. She watched him for a few seconds, that glint of humour in her gaze.

Finally, she gave a casual shrug as she went back to scanning the albums. "I listen to a lot of music, too." She paused, and Steve thought perhaps she was just going to ignore it and move on. But then she looked up at him from beneath her lashes. "Although, my soundtrack is probably better than yours. Because I listen to so much music."

Steve cringed and rubbed the back of his neck. "Yeah, that was kinda dumb." Meg just laughed. "I'm gonna change the subject now."

"That sounds like a good idea."

Steve straightened up and held his arms out, gesturing to the music surrounding them. "So what song gave you your moment?"

This made Meg adopt the same serious expression as before. "Right. I'm pretty sure it was by the Psychedelic Furs. It's called 'Heaven'. It's a great song."

"Okay, cool, yeah," Steve pushed off of the table and headed towards her. "Psychedelic Furs would be in the new wave section, so we'll take a look here." Meg had been in the right aisle, just on the wrong end. As Steve flicked through the albums, Meg came to stand beside him. She scanned the adjacent set of records, her elbow gently bumping his. Steve glanced at her. From that angle, her eyes were hidden by her bangs, but she'd tucked the rest of her hair behind her ears, revealing a line of silver studs and hoops trailing along her lobe and cartilage. He found his gaze caught on the piercings for a

moment. Something about them seemed *right*; as if this small, angry, passionate girl wouldn't be complete without them.

Meg must have sensed his gaze because she looked up at him. Steve quickly turned back to the records.

She totally just caught him staring at her. He needed to say something, to divert her attention. He cleared his throat.

"So, are you sure you want a record? 'Cause we have cassettes as well. It might be better, if you want to listen to it whenever you want rather than when you've got a record player."

Meg turned slightly towards him. He looked back down at her to see her bite her bottom lip again. It was distracting; he forced himself to focus on her dark eyes. "That's a good point." She flicked her eyes to his, then nodded. "Yeah, let's see if you've got the cassette."

He led her over to the wall of cassettes beside the front counter, and they spent a few minutes scanning them for the right tape. Meg made a few comments regarding bands with particularly *interesting* names (*Violent Femmes? Angry Females? Murderous Women?*), and Steve replied with quick, teasing comments about their sound (*It's like upbeat angst. You wanna shake your fist at the sky while you dance.*). Steve found the band and their four albums as he crouched down to the bottom of the stacks. Meg knelt beside him and shook her head when he asked if she happened to know which of them had the song she was searching for. They each took a couple tapes and quickly scanned their tracks.

A moment later, Steve grinned and held up the tape in his hand. "Guess what I found." Meg smiled and reached for the cassette, but Steve pulled it back. "Nope."

An instant frown settled over her features. "Seriously?"

The grin on his face didn't waver. "I'll give it to you, no problem. I just need one thing."

"And that is?"

Steve knew he must have a wicked look in his eyes. He was going to

enjoy this. He tilted his head towards her. "All you have to do," he drawled, "Is compliment my driving." A look of complete disbelief crossed Meg's face, and was quickly followed by an incredulous expression. It made a genuine smile settle over Steve's lips. "It shouldn't be that hard; I mean you're only telling the truth, right?"

"The truth?" Meg scoffed. "Your driving is terrible. And irresponsible! You had four kids in your car and you were definitely speeding. Plus, I saw you zip right past a stop sign. And when you left the arcade?"

"That was right across the street! What could I have possibly done in a distance of thirty feet that you could get mad about?"

Meg made a *tsk*-ing noise and shook her head. "Where do I even begin?" Steve struggled not to smile at the exaggerated expression of disappointment on her face. She held up her fingers and began ticking them off one by one. "Didn't allow enough time to look both directions for oncoming traffic. Didn't use your blinker when you turned into the record store's parking lot. And you nearly hit the curb on your way out of the arcade. Honestly, I can't understand how you're even legally allowed on the streets without hazard signs plastered all over your vehicle."

Steve put a hand to his chest. "I never knew that was how you felt about me."

Putting a hand on his shoulder, she leaned forward and gave him a sympathetic look. "Don't feel bad. Not everyone can be as perfect of a driver as myself." With that, she snatched the tape out of his hand and rose to her feet.

Steve rose as well and put his hands on his hips. "Perfect driver? You screeched into the arcade lot and threw your car into two spaces!"

At this, Meg rolled her eyes. "Please. I was in a single space. And there was no screeching. My brakes work extremely well, thank you very much." Before Steve could counter, she pointed a finger at him. "Plus, I haven't even mentioned the way you tore down a school zone and squeezed into an illegal space in front of the middle school with your music blasting."

"Mad World," Steve recalled. "You recognised it earlier."

"Of course I did. *Tears for Fears* is a quality band." She said this as if it was common knowledge. "But their above-average level of music doesn't mean it's safe to have your music that loud while driving. Pretty sure it's actually a hazard."

Steve held his hands up at her relentless ranting. "If I say you're a better driver, will you stop insulting me?"

A triumphant look slid onto her face. "Absolutely."

"Fine. You're a better driver than I am."

"It's funny," she mused. "I seem to recall you wanting me to say something like that."

"And I seem to recall you being a better loser than you are a winner."

She took a few seconds to register his words before that now-familiar glare returned to her features. "I did not lose that argument at the arcade! I just stopped arguing because we were in public."

Steve just looked at her, standing there with defiance lining her every inch. She had her hands on her hips, her chin jutted up at him, and he was pretty sure she was pushing herself up onto her toes. Even with the extra couple inches, she couldn't match his eye level. He felt himself smirk. "Do you have a lot of pent-up aggression or do you just love arguing?"

This made her blink. She settled back onto her heels and crossed her arms. "Both." Steve snorted and he could see the hints of a grin on her face. "I'm going to take a page out of your book and not-so-subtly change the subject." She used the cassette in her hand to gesture at the wall of tapes beside them. "Got any recommendations while I'm here? Or do you not know what 'good music' is?"

A dry laugh escaped Steve's lips. "Not according to Hank. But you like Psychedelic Furs and Tears for Fears, so I think I can help you out. Let me grab a couple things and we'll check 'em out in the tape player." He jerked a thumb at where the player sat on the wide counter next to them.

As he turned to scan the tapes before him, Meg leant against the wall and looked past him. "I actually don't really listen to Tears for Fears that much."

Steve picked up a few tapes and continued looking over the rest. "You just know Mad World? That's okay, I'll grab that album as well." He picked it up and flashed it at her. She gave him a small smile.

"I actually have the record." Steve gave her a quizzical look. She shrugged. "I've listened to it once or twice and I like their sound, but..." Something crossed her face, and her eyes seemed to darken as she looked away from him. "My parents got divorced a few years back and my dad likes to pretend like it's all peachy. Obviously, it's not, so he tries to bribe me with stuff to make me like him or something. He gave me the album last year. So, I don't really listen to it; I guess because of the association with my crap-bag dad."

Meg was frowning at the carpet, which was ugly in both colour and in pattern, so she was probably nauseous as well as bummed.

Steve gripped the cassettes in his hands. He could see the tension lining her shoulders beneath her denim jacket; her earrings glinted at him. She was frowning, but her dark eyes seemed to hold something heavier than just anger at her dad. Maybe it was because he genuinely liked her or maybe it was just because he thought she was cute, but he found that he didn't like her looking bummed out. Plus, Tears for Fears was too good of a band for her to not be listening to it for such a crappy reason. He stepped over to the player and slid a tape in. When she looked up at him, he gave her a soft expression. "Well, you can associate it with somebody else now."

Her eyes seemed to brighten, and a smile began to touch her lips as the cassette began to play – really, painfully, loudly.

Both of them jumped and Meg even slapped her hands over her ears. Steve fumbled for the knob, accidentally turning it up a little louder before he managed to turn the volume down to a level that wouldn't shatter their eardrums.

Meg lowered her hands and he gave her a sheepish look. There was a beat of awkward silence before she smiled a bright, wide smile and

then began to laugh. Steve chuckled and rubbed the back of his neck. "Sorry."

Her grin didn't falter. "You don't have to apologise. It was nice of you, until you permanently damaged my hearing." Steve gave another nervous laugh as she stepped over to him and picked up the stack of tapes he'd collected. "Besides," she began, looking at him from beneath her lashes. "Watching you squirm and blush is oddly entertaining."

Steve's eyebrows shot up and once again Meg began to laugh at him. "That's not very nice."

"Oh, come on," she replied. "You're the kind of guy who acts all smooth and cool, and maybe you are, a little bit, but you're as human as the rest of us, even if your hair suggests otherwise. So watching you get all awkward and red is endlessly amusing."

Her grin was mischievous and her wide eyes had him pinned into place. He raised a single brow and tilted his head back. Her gaze didn't waver. He knew she was just teasing, but he didn't like her snap judgment of him. The guy she had described was one that he had found he didn't like as much as he once did. He was trying to be better than that guy; better than himself. Besides, he was pretty sure that he hadn't blushed. "You've got me all figured out, huh?"

Meg's brows dipped slightly as she watched him, and her grin melted away. "No," she murmured. "Not yet." They watched each other for a few seconds. As he studied her, Steve suddenly remembered that he'd only met this girl a few hours ago. She was practically a stranger. But, for some reason, she didn't seem so strange.

Before he could say anything, Meg lowered her gaze to the cassettes in her hands. "Devo, Blondie, The Cure," she read. "You've got taste, I'll admit."

Steve's attention snapped back to the sound of 'The Hurting' and the fact that he was standing in his workplace. He forced himself to take a few measured steps back; not so many as to be obviously putting distance between them, but enough that he wasn't in her space anymore. He slid an easy grin onto his face. "No one ever said Hank

was right." This made her snort, and his grin became a little more genuine. "You seem to be into new wave, and these are some of the best of the genre."

She nodded. "I can agree with that. But what's your taste in other genres?" She hoisted herself to sit on the counter beside the tape player, swinging her legs beneath her. It spoke of a level of casualness that Steve would have thought odd for anyone else, but seemed normal for her. "You seem like a rock kind of guy. I bet you go crazy for Zepplin. Or Def Leppard." Her expression was challenging, and Steve could feel another grin threatening to spread across his face. But it only encouraged her. She developed a sly tone, and that mischievous glint was back in her eyes. "That's a yes. How about glam rock? Your hair says you're totally into the glam. Are you just wild for Queen? You look like a huge Bowie fan." She had him grinning now, and she became more ridiculous. "Are you? Are you a Bowie fan? Did he inspire the hair? Do you look in the mirror and say, 'I wish I could look more like David'?"

A loud, unfiltered laugh escaped him as she spoke. "I do not look like Bowie."

"And it is your greatest shame," she replied. Steve grinned at her and her ridiculously bright eyes.

They watched each other for another moment, their smiles fading slowly. The air around them seemed to thicken. Steve realised that he had been staring at her a lot, considering she'd only been in the store for about twenty minutes. He'd be worried that he was being creepy if it weren't for the fact that she boldly met his eyes whenever he looked at her, and he had felt her watching him a few times. If he was being creepy, then so was she.

The song filtering around them ended, and Meg's comment about moments rang faintly in Steve's ears.

Something changed in her gaze; a slight widening of her eyes, a quirk of her lips, a tinge of pink around her cheeks. Meg looked away from him, and the air seemed to lift.

Steve fought the urge to rub his neck again. When Meg looked back

up at him, her eyes were clear again and the small grin she wore held none of the mischief that it had in the moment before. "Well, even if you're not crazy for Bowie I still think that you worship the rock gods."

Her comment led them into a long debate over the best of several genres.

"You cannot look me in the face and tell me that Joan Jett is better than Pat Benatar. They're equally talented. You're crazy if you think Pat is any less enjoyable. She's got killer range."

"*I'm* crazy?"

"Good for you for admitting it."

"You're the one who thinks that The Boomtown Rats are somehow better than Ultravox, as if that makes any sense."

"Geldorf's vocals *make* the songs!"

"And so does Heyward's, but you don't think Haircut One Hundred is any good."

"The ska influence is inexcusable."

Steve shook his head, fighting a grin. Meg had shifted to sit on the edge of the counter and had drawn herself up as she fought him on nearly every point. It made her eyes flash, even as she joked and smirked. He was enjoying it way too much.

Realising that he was arguing with her more to get a rise out of her than anything, Meg tucked her hair behind her ears and sat back. "I'll forgive your poor taste on the grounds that your mental stability is questionable." Steve rolled his eyes as she flicked her gaze past him, to a clock on the far wall. "It's already six-thirty. I'm starving."

Steve nodded. "Let me ring you up."

She slid off the counter and turned as Steve went behind it. As he counted out her change, Meg leaned her elbows on the counter. "I have to pick Dustin up at nine. Got any suggestions for a place to

grab a bite? Preferably something cheap but not crappy."

"A cheap but not crappy restaurant in Hawkins?" Steve shook his head as he passed her the money and the Psychedelic Furs tape. "Good luck." Meg rolled her eyes at him as he leaned on the counter as well. "Try Chickens."

Meg quirked her brows at him. "Chickens? Do you mean literal chickens? Are you telling me to forego a restaurant and find my own feathered friend to eat?"

A short laugh escaped him. "No, I'm not telling you to steal and slaughter a chicken. It's a place called Chickens. The guy gave his restaurant the weirdest name possible, but he's got the best fried chicken in town."

"Better than KFC?"

"Oh, yeah. Even their mashed potatoes are better."

"Careful," Meg hummed. "Going against a major corporation like that? That's some risky business right there."

The image of a large, dark lab flashed through Steve's mind. He smirked. "Fighting the man's kind of a habit of mine." Meg raised a sceptical eyebrow at him, unimpressed. Steve straightened. "Hey, if you're picking Dustin up from Mike's, you might want to bring him some food. They forget to eat sometimes, if they're doing a campaign."

Meg watched him for a moment, face impassive. She looked at him from under her lashes, and Steve fought the urge to fidget under her steady gaze. Slowly, she rose off the counter. "You spend a lot of time with my cousin and his friends," she noted. Her voice was speculative and there was something suggestive – maybe even suspicious – in her tone. Steve nodded carefully. Meg's face revealed nothing of her inner thoughts. "I don't know him that well, but I haven't really thought that Dustin is super cool to hang out with."

Steve restrained the sigh that wanted to escape him. It was weird. Of course it was. An eighteen-year-old guy that genuinely liked to hang

out with a bunch of fourteen-year-old kids. It's not like he went over to their houses or joined them in the arcade or played Dungeons and Dragons with them. But he did give them rides when he could and he talked to them like equals. He was protective of them. He didn't let a bunch of dog-monsters eat them and he didn't let an abusive idiot beat them up and he didn't let them ride their bikes through the snow because a cold sucks as much as a bite from an interdimensional demon. It was weird, but it was what it was.

"Yeah," he said as he scratched behind his ear. "It's kind of weird. But I had to look after them for a while last year and I guess I just still try to do it. Look after them, I mean. Especially Dustin."

The girl across from him – he remembered again that he'd only known her for a few hours – had a relentless, dark stare that made Steve want to blink a few times just so she would do it too and give him a break. But after a moment, a small, slow smile touched her cheeks. "I can respect that." A hint of relief touched Steve's shoulders and he smiled widely at her. Meg gave him a sarcastic look, as if his sincerity was embarrassing. But he could see the tug of a grin on her lips. "I'll see if these chickens of yours do orders to go."

"They do," Steve informed her. "But they don't deliver. They can't fly, and they don't walk fast enough. The one time they tried truck delivery was a disaster. There's still feathers floating around fourteenth street."

A genuine, unhindered laugh bubbled from Meg's throat and Steve was surprised by how much he liked the sound of it. They grinned at each other for a moment. Steve couldn't remember the last time he'd felt this sort of... easy chemistry with someone. It was nice. He almost didn't want it to end.

Meg gestured towards the door with the tape in her hand. "I should get going. Thanks for helping me find this, by the way." Steve nodded. "I guess I'll see you around." Her gaze ducked for a moment before she drew her shoulders up a bit. "This is probably horrible to say because we were just introduced a few hours ago, but" – she shook her head, as though telling herself not to say it – "your name is Steve, right? I'm not thinking of the wrong name?"

He grinned. "Now I want to tell you it's actually Joe or Charlie just to mess with you." Meg lowered her brows at him even as she fought a grin. "It is Steve. Steve Harrington."

She nodded. "Nice to meet you. And you probably remembered, but I'm Meg. Robbins. Just so, you know, I don't feel so bad for making you tell me your name twice."

"You should feel bad," Steve chided her. "How can you forget the name of a random guy you met?"

Meg shook her head as she backed towards the door. "See you around, Sam Harrison."

"See you around, Molly Rogers."

When she strode out of the record store, Steve pulled out the Tears for Fears tape from the cassette player and put it away with the remains of a smile on his face.

4. Family Matters

Welcome to chapter four!

First off, a huge THANK-YOU to all of the kind likes and follows. Thank you to LeggomyMeggo92, SSJGamerYT, and iAmCC for the lovely reviews they left. And especially to compte-tes-doigts! Your "essay" absolutely made my week! You have no idea how much you thoughts and support mean to me. They made me want to finish writing this story.

In all honesty, I struggled a bit with this chapter and I'm still not completely happy with how it turned out. But, here it is! I hope you'll like it. It is considerably shorter than last chapter. I promise there is a longer one on the way!

Disclaimer: I own nothing, save for Megan, her mother, and my mistakes.

Meg didn't go to Chickens. The restaurant or the poultry. Like an idiot, she'd taken Steve's suggestion and then waltzed out of the door without asking for directions. It was only as she'd sat in her car and wiped the lingering smile off of her face that she realised that she had no idea where these chickens were. And she wasn't about to walk back in there and ask for directions. That would definitely seem like she was just finding excuses to talk to him. Which she wouldn't do. Even if maybe she wanted to.

So eventually she'd stopped in a KFC and padded across the sticky floor to order. *Way to stick it to the man, Meg.* She smiled at the pimple-faced cashier and left with her to-go bag.

As she climbed into her car, she winced at the thought of it smelling like chicken. She cracked her windows as much as she dared with the low temperature in the night air. With the heater and the overhead light on, Meg settled in to eat greasy chicken and scribble in her script-book. She'd decided to leave the beginning for now. Instead, she flipped back to where she'd laid out the details of her characters.

She poured over her cramped hand-writing, squinting to read in the poor lighting. Maybe she needed to get a better feel of her characters, of their dynamics with each other, in order to get the story rolling.

They were, after all, the driving force of the film. The cinematography and plot could be the Greatest of All Time, but if the characters were flat and boring, audiences wouldn't care how well the film was made. She scanned over the main character, the supporting roles, the antagonists, the side characters. These were the hooks which would cause audiences to become invested in her story. She had to have them fleshed out perfectly.

Before long, Meg glanced at the clock and realised she had to be picking Dustin up soon. She snapped her notebook shut. When she strode back across the sticky floor, the pimple-faced cashier gave her an odd look. *Bet you thought you'd seen the last of me.*

Once she had the takeaway bag in hand and turned to leave, Meg's ear perked at the beginning of a song playing over the speakers. Bowie. *Let's Dance*. A small, subconscious grin tugged on Meg's lips as she thought about sitting on the record store's counter, watching Steve try to contain his laughter. *Did he inspire the hair?*

When she got in her car, she switched on the radio and scanned the channels until she found the one playing the Bowie song. By the time she pulled up to the address Dustin had given her, the song had ended, but she was still thinking about the record store. She liked Jonathan and Nancy and the few of their friends she'd met over the course of the week. But talking and joking with Steve had been so *easy*. It had felt like she didn't have to try or pretend; she just said what she thought. And he'd answered just as quickly.

And he's cute, her thoughts whispered as she walked up to the house.

Meg shook her head and knocked on the door. *Nope. We're not going there.*

The door opened and Meg was greeted by the smiling face of Nancy Wheeler. "Hey, Meg!"

Meg blinked. *My cousin's friend's older sister's ex-boyfriend*. Nancy's ex-boyfriend. Nancy's ex-boyfriend who she still hung out with. Steve Harrington.

Yeah, we're definitely not going there.

Nancy's smile wavered slightly at Meg's lack of response. Meg quickly cleared her throat. "Uh, hey, Nancy." She tried a smile. *Play it cool, Meg. Don't be weird.* "How are you?"

"Um, I'm good," Nancy answered. "You?"

"Oh, yeah, I'm great." Meg realised that she was smiling way too widely for what the situation called for. She relaxed her face a bit. Nancy watched her uncertainly, her own smile beginning to drop off of her face. "I'm here to pick up Dustin? Is he here?"

"Of course, yeah." Nancy stepped back and gestured for Meg to come inside. "He's in the basement with the rest of them. If you come in, I'll just run him up here."

"Nope!" Meg blurted. Now Nancy's brows furrowed at Meg's unquestionably odd behaviour. *You're being weird. There's no reason to be weird. Just – be cool.* Meg stuffed her hands in her pockets and gave Nancy a cool, casual shrug. "I just don't want to impose on you. Or your parents. I'll just wait out here."

Nancy's eyes flicked over Meg's face, searching. Then she glanced at the ground, which still had patches of sloshy snow. Then, with a resigned expression, she nodded. "Okay. I'll send him out."

Once Nancy had left, it took Meg all of three seconds to realise that she was an absolute idiot. It was freezing! She wasn't close to being dressed for standing outside in the January night air. Curse her awkwardness! And her pride for not allowing her to just step inside after refusing to enter. Wrapping her arms around herself, Meg quick-stepped to her car, berating herself as she scrambled inside and cranked the heat up as much as possible. She sat there, rubbing her hands together, feeling pathetic.

She wasn't sure why realising that Steve was Nancy's ex threw her so much. They'd dated. So what? Meg objectively thought he was attractive. So what? Being friends with Jonathan and Nancy probably meant that she'd be around Steve as well. So what? Hadn't she wanted to be friends with him? She liked talking to and joking around with him. And she liked hanging out with Nancy and Jonathan. So, it was actually a good thing.

Meg shook her head at herself. It had just caught her off guard. That was all. Now that she'd processed it, it wasn't a big deal. It wasn't even a deal.

Movement at the Wheelers' front door caught her attention. As the door swung open, Dustin and Nancy both stepped out. Nancy looked confused for a moment before looking over to Meg's car. Dustin gave Nancy a small smile and said something before he stepped off the porch. The redheaded girl from the arcade stepped out of the door and followed him down the driveway. Nancy sent a tentative wave toward Meg, which Meg returned quickly before Nancy stepped back inside.

When they reached the street, the two kids exchanged words quickly. Dustin gestured towards Meg's car, but the girl took one look at it and shook her head. She had a skateboard under her arm. After waving Dustin off, she threw it down and began to carefully push her way down the sidewalk. Dustin watched her for a few seconds before hurrying over to the car.

He climbed inside and sat slumped in the front seat. He glanced at her, eyes hard, then looked out of the windshield at the retreating form of the girl.

Real subtle, kid.

Meg shifted in her seat. "Is your friend seriously going to skateboard home? It's freezing out there."

Dustin threw his hands up. "I guess. Lucas already left and she said that she didn't want a ride from you."

His words made Meg still. She looked at him, then at the girl, barely visible in the night. She gripped the steering wheel. "Well, too bad, 'cause she's getting one." Meg drove slowly to catch up with the girl, rolling her window down when she reached her. The girl halted her rolling, looking at her suspiciously. "Get in," Meg demanded. The girl didn't move and her hard gaze didn't waver. Meg huffed and began to say she could forget it, but Dustin leaned across her.

"Just get in the car, Max. Do you have to be stubborn about

everything?"

Max flicked her eyes to him. "You're just mad because I didn't do the move you wanted in the stupid game." Dustin just rolled his eyes at her. Max pursed her lips and made a show of getting in and slamming the door. Meg clenched her jaw. This kid had a lot of attitude, considering Meg didn't have to be helping her. *Yes, you do. No way you'd leave her out in the snow.* Meg ignored the thought. In the back, Max crossed her arms.

After Max had bit out her address, Meg shook her head and pulled the car away from the kerb. She pointed at the bag on the console without looking at either of the kids. Although she was sure they'd noticed it already; her car smelled like she had her own deep fryer in the trunk. "I brought you some food. I dunno if it's still hot. You guys can share, or whatever."

Dustin turned to her. "Are you trying to bribe me or something?"

Meg felt a flash of irritation and looked over at him quickly, shooting him a glare. "I can't be nice without having an ulterior motive? That's harsh."

"Forgive me for being surprised that you have a nice side," Dustin retorted as he dug around in the to-go bag.

"I'm nice," Meg muttered.

Max leaned forward from the backseat, peeking around Dustin's head to peer into the bag. "I don't even know you and I don't think you're nice." Meg spluttered, but Max didn't even look at her. "You totally laid into Steve for no reason and you kept calling us all names. Not nice."

"Excellent point, Maxine," Dustin declared. Max shoved at him and snatched the box of fries from his hands before sitting back in the seat.

Meg was still frowning at the road. "I'm nice," she insisted. "You just haven't given me an opportunity to show it. Remember the whole 'she's the worst' thing?" Dustin scoffed beside her as he threw a

nugget in his mouth.

"Sure, Meg."

Max snickered in the backseat. Meg huffed. "Whatever, dweeb." She turned a street. There was a moment of quiet. In her mind, the voices of her new friends echoed, suggesting she give Dustin a chance, that he wasn't that bad. Meg took a breath. She'd show them *nice*. "Did you guys have a good time?"

Dustin gave her a wry look before shrugging. Max made a noncommittal noise.

"Okay," Meg hummed. She could understand them not being very receptive to the whole *nice* thing, but they could at least cooperate. She'd have to do better; meet them on their level. "You were playing *Dungeons and Dragons*, right? Did you do a... crusade?"

Dustin swallowed a mouthful of chicken. "A what?"

Meg waved a hand. "One of those things. A parade? A party?"

"What are you even saying?" Max asked.

"Do you mean a campaign?" Dustin deadpanned.

"Yes. Yeah. A campaign."

Dustin smirked at her, amused. "Yeah, we did. A short one. Mike is too obsessed with his girlfriend to plan a long one." Max snorted and Dustin turned around to trade his nuggets for her fries.

Meg nodded, as if she totally knew both what campaigns were and how long they normally lasted. "Cool. So... did you win?"

"Did we win?"

"Yeah. Did you win your campaign?"

"We defeated our enemies," Dustin answered. "We completed the campaign."

"We played the nerdiest game ever," Max input.

"Dungeons and Dragons is not nerdy, Max," Dustin said, sounding as if he was repeating himself. "It's complex. It requires strategy and quick-thinking. It's cool."

"Whatever you wanna tell yourself."

Meg frowned in thought. She really didn't know anything about *Dungeons and Dragons*. The only thing she could relate to it was overhearing people talk about it at her old school. They had never been the kind of people she would waste time with. "You play as characters in that game, right?"

Dustin looked over at her, his cold demeanour starting to slip. "Yeah. We each have a unique character that plays a specific role in the team."

"Okay," Meg said. "Like a sports team: playing different positions but with the same ultimate goal. Just with a bit more pretending."

This made Dustin snort, but she saw a grin at the corners of his mouth. "Sports analogies," he muttered. Meg wondered at the comment, but didn't question it. Max leaned forward to snatch some fries from him, but Dustin batted her hand away. "We don't have a team captain or a quarterback or something. We are characters with unique and useful abilities." Meg's brows furrowed, but she went along with it. "So I'm the bard, Mike is our paladin, Lucas is our ranger, Will's our cleric-

"And I'm the zoomer," Max chimed in with a smug expression.

Dustin rolled his eyes. "She's our rogue," he told Meg.

"She can't be what she wants?" Meg asked, frowning at her cousin.

"Yeah," Max said. "I should get to be what I want."

"No-" Dustin began.

"It's a pretend game, isn't it?" Meg waved a hand. "So, she can be whatever she wants."

"It's *role-playing*," Dustin enunciated. "There's set roles, and you pick one and make it your own. A zoomer isn't a class or a race."

"So make it one," Meg contended.

"That's what I've been saying!"

Dustin let out a frustrated groan. "You guys don't even know how the game works. I'm not going to argue this with you."

"Good," Max retorted. "Cause this is my house."

Meg pulled up next to the kerb and then looked at Max in the rear-view mirror, giving her a smirk. "It's nice to know there's someone else out there who doesn't let my dork cousin get away with everything."

Max snorted a laugh as Dustin scoffed. "Thanks for the ride. See you later, Dustin." She climbed out of the car as Dustin mumbled a goodbye.

As Meg reached to shift the car into *drive*, Dustin put his hand out to stop her. "Wait," he said. Meg frowned as she looked at him, but his gaze was focused on Max's form slipping through her front door.

"Don't tell me what to do."

Dustin's face morphed into a glare, but he only slid his eyes to her for a few seconds. "Put your stuck-up attitude on hold and just wait a minute."

Irritation flashed through her, but she did as he asked, slumping back into her seat with a huff. "She's already inside," she grumbled. "What can possibly-" She cut herself off as she looked at Dustin's expression; there was concern on his face. The lightbulb flickered on in her head. *Duh, you idiot*. Her gaze joined Dustin's in watching the small house. After a second, Meg cracked her window a bit, listening.

The cousins sat, waiting, watching, for a minute or so. They didn't see anything; not even a change in the light coming through the windows. Meg thought she might have heard a brief shout, but it was possible that she'd imagined it. Otherwise, all seemed well.

"Okay. We can go," Dustin decided. He sat back in his seat and looked resolutely at the road as Meg began to drive.

It was quiet for a few minutes. Dustin never spared her a glance, only watching the passing darkness and finishing his food. Meg felt a weight on her chest, something that made her thoughts heavy. She'd never stopped to consider that these kids had lives. Lives that were as complicated and intricate as her own. Maybe it was because they were just kids; how much could kids have to put up with, anyways? But she'd been fifteen when her parents first started to spiral towards divorce. And that was nothing compared to what that fiery girl seemed to be living with.

Dustin wadded up the to-go bag in his hands; the sound seemed deafening in the silent car.

Meg pursed her lips, brows furrowed. "Is it her father?" She asked, her voice a low murmur.

Her question made Dustin look at her with a slight frown. Then he looked away as his frown hardened. "Her step-dad," he corrected, "is a douchebag. And her step-brother learned all his tricks." His hands curled into fists in his lap. "It's been a while since he really bothered her, but..."

A lump formed in Meg's throat. Her fingers gripped the steering wheel a little tighter than before. "How old is he? Her step-brother, I mean."

Dustin's voice was even as he said, "Same age as you." Meg flicked her eyes over to him, trying to read into the comment, but Dustin was looking at the passing streetlights. "He's in your grade, too. His name's Billy."

Meg restrained a bitter laugh. Was this guy like the town's big menace? Everyone she met hated him. And it sounded like it was for good reason. She recalled Nancy's ominous comment. *He's done some bad stuff to some good people.* From what she'd seen so far, Billy was rude, offensive, and unapologetic. And according to Dustin, he was also violent and abusive. Meg's teeth ground together as she thought about Max having to live with both him and his father twenty-four-

seven. It was awful.

But what could she do about it besides give the kid rides home? The thought made Meg frown. All she'd done was make sure that Max was in the arms of abuse sooner rather than later.

Meg shifted in her seat. "That sucks."

"Yeah."

It was quiet for the rest of the drive home. When they pulled into the driveway and Meg turned off the engine, she debated over what to say. It didn't feel right to just move on, to go inside and pretend that everything was the same between them. Maybe it was just Meg, but she thought that something had shifted.

As Dustin unbuckled his seatbelt, Meg cleared her throat. "Grab the KFC trash, too. My car already stinks because of it; I don't want it in here overnight."

Dustin rolled his eyes at her but did as she asked. She berated herself. *You can do better than that.*

They walked up the drive and as Meg unlocked the door, she spoke to the floor. "I hope your friends didn't give you crap for me acting like a psycho at the arcade."

Dustin stopped. He gave her a strange look as she shut and locked the door. "Was that some weird form of apology?"

"What? No."

"Because that's what you should be doing. Apologising for being a psycho."

"I am not going to apologise for being concerned when you climbed into a stranger's car while I was supposed to be responsible for you."

"Steve isn't a stranger."

Meg snapped her mouth closed, a retort hot on her tongue. Steve wasn't a stranger, not to Dustin. But Meg was. She swallowed her

retort – and her pride – as she threw her hands up. "I'm not going to apologise for being concerned." Dustin went to groan, but Meg cut him off. "But I will apologise for flipping out on you before I asked you what was going on."

Now it was Dustin's turn to snap his mouth shut. Meg struggled not to laugh at the surprise on his face. For a second, he just looked at her, as though unsure what to say. Meg would've been lying if she said she wasn't pleased with herself for making this smart-mouth kid speechless. Although, she did register in the back of her mind how pathetic it was that her performing an act of humility was so unprecedented that it shocked someone into silence.

Dustin blinked a few times, then lifted his hands slightly. "Okay, well, that's fine. But I won't forgive you for making me share my food with Max."

Meg released an incredulous laugh. "Seriously?"

"Uh, absolutely! She barely left me any fries. And she took way more than her share of chicken nuggets."

Meg shook her head, fighting off a grin. She walked away from him, towards the hall. "*Goodnight*, Dustin." She could practically hear him smirking behind her.

Aside from special occasions – such as seeing her sister for the first time in two years – Virginia Henderson was a vocal advocate for getting a full twelve hours of sleep. It was because of this fact that as Meg treaded lightly down the hall, she was entirely expecting to find her mother laying heavily in her bed, hands crossed over her stomach and sleeping mask firmly in place.

Instead, when she slowly and gently opened their bedroom door, Meg was faced by the full weight of Virginia's attention. Meg was immediately, instinctively on edge.

Virginia was sitting on the edge of her bed, dressed in her pastel-coloured nightclothes. She wasn't even trying to play it cool. She was very clearly waiting up for Meg. Not out of niceness, oh no. Meg knew without a doubt that she had just walked into a trap hidden by

smiles and concerned tones.

Meg considered just turning around and walking out, save herself the impending argument, regret, and headache. But her mother had her blue eyes pinned on her like an insect in a glass case. It was too late to run out now.

"You're up late," Meg ventured. She walked nonchalantly to the dresser, digging around for her pyjamas. Virginia's stare followed her. "Thanks for waiting up for me."

Virginia's lips pinched in discomfort. Meg turned away to hide her smirk. *Take that!* She couldn't very well deny it without being undeniably rude. And if there was one thing that Virginia Henderson avoided being at all cost, it was being rude. It was a flaw which had brought the woman an unfair amount of problems. Meg had a strong dislike for this trait of her mother's, but she was not above using it for her own gain. Neither of them were perfect.

Virginia adjusted her robe around her waist, and nodded stiffly. "Of course." Meg rolled her eyes. *One-nil, Megan.* Virginia cleared her throat. "You brought Dustin home?"

"No, I left him out in the snow."

Meg could feel her mother's frown against the back of her head. "Must you always be so obtuse, Megan?"

"Well, I'm not exactly sure how to be acute," Meg said. "But if that'll please you, Mother, I'll give it a shot." Meg turned around to lean against the dresser, crossing her arms against her mother's glare. She gave her a sweet grin.

Virginia released a huff. "It's that attitude that's giving me migraines, Megan Robbins." *Yeah, that and the divorce you haven't gotten over.* "I'm worried that you're going to give Claudia trouble that she doesn't need or deserve. And I can tell that you and Dustin aren't getting along."

"Really? With the way you manipulated me into picking him up from school, I was sure you thought that we were best friends."

"Megan, I will not apologise for trying to get you two to move past your differences." Her words made Megan recoil. She hated how much they sounded like her own. Or perhaps it was the other way around.

Meg's jaw clenched and she looked past her mother at the wall. She'd rather pull her own teeth out of her head than try to insist that she was making an effort with Dustin – or had started to. It wouldn't make a difference. It wouldn't be enough, not for her mother. Instead, she jutted her chin out and frowned at Virginia. "So you want us to be totally copacetic, just a couple of buddies. Why? So you can have something at least close to the perfect little family?"

Virginia's brows shot together. "Is that so bad? You *are* family, Megan. It's not something you can just blow off like everything else."

Heat simmered beneath Meg's skin. She could feel her fingers curl into her palms, her nails digging into her skin. Her face tightened into a glare. "Right, because you've got such a great track record with holding onto family." Virginia's eyes widened in disbelief, then narrowed in anger. Meg pushed away from the dresser and stomped across the room, pyjamas in hand. She whirled around long enough for one last barb. "Tell Dad I said hi when you talk to him in ten years."

With that, she slammed the door shut. As she paced into the bathroom to change, she could feel her hands shaking slightly. Her eyes were starting to moisten. She berated herself for being so emotional.

As she curled up on the couch, pulling the quilt up to her chin, she could already feel guilt beginning to gnaw away at her hot anger. She fought against it. She was tired of her mother trying to force her to be perfect, trying to make her feel bad for not meeting her standards. It was a joke. If anyone had the right to feel let down and disappointed, it was Meg.

Her bitter thoughts did nothing to quell the regret eating at her. It was a long night.

Meg woke the next morning to the smell of coffee.

She blinked slowly, then peered through bleary eyes at the clock on the wall across from her. *Seven o'clock*. On a *Saturday morning*. Who was up at seven in the –

"Good morning, dear."

Meg startled at the voice of her aunt. She flicked her eyes over to the woman sitting in a recliner diagonal from her. Claudia held her mug in one hand and used the other to slowly stir the coffee with a spoon. She didn't look at Meg. It was perhaps the first time that Meg had seen her without a smile.

"Good morning," Meg muttered in a raspy voice. Judging by how quiet the rest of the house seemed, Meg guessed that they were the only two awake. She stared at her aunt, but couldn't seem to gauge her attitude or guess at her thoughts. Meg attempted to test the waters. "Did you sleep well?"

"Not particularly. This house has thin walls."

Meg's stomach dropped.

Claudia finally lifted her gaze to look steadily at her. Meg swallowed, unsure what to say. Claudia didn't blink. "The public library on fifth opens at eight. There's a café next to it that makes lovely blueberry scones. Why don't you make a morning of it?" She tilted her chin down, her tone lowering. "I think I'll spend some time with your mother today. Just the two of us."

Meg got the message. "That sounds nice."

Claudia nodded and took a sip of her coffee. "There's some clean clothes of yours in the laundry room that you can wear. No need to disturb your mother."

Shoving her blanket off, Meg rose slowly from the couch. She looked at her aunt for a moment, who merely stared back, expression blank. Meg pressed her lips together. "I'm going out with some friends tonight. I'll be home in the afternoon to change."

"That's fine, dear. I hope you come back with a clearer head."

Meg's fingers twitched. She nodded at her aunt, then left the room. After she got herself ready to leave, she snatched up her bag and keys. Her aunt stepped out of the kitchen with hot, peanut-buttered toast and a glass of milk. She handed them to Meg with a small smile. "We all say things we don't mean, honey. But we should never let them take root. Better to pluck weeds before they wreck the garden." Meg looked away for a second, then met Claudia's eyes again. Something was making her throat feel thick. She nodded. Claudia's smile became a little brighter. "Have a good morning, Megan."

"You too, Aunt Claudia."